

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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ABOLETHIC SOVEREIGNTY BOOK II



CITY OF
TORMENT

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Bruce R. Cordell

CHAPTER ONE

Eleven Years after the Spellplague The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Veltalar, Aglarond

The young tough thrust his dagger at Japheth's stomach.

Japheth retreated into the folds of his cloak. Shadows slapped his face like gauzy moth wings. With a second step, he was back in the abandoned brewery, a dozen yards from where the kid had tried to knife him.

He pointed. The weapon in the tough's grip flared with green fire. It clattered to the floor, trailing a spiral of emerald smoke. The kid bellowed in disbelief, clutching his scorched hand.

Japheth said, "You didn't answer me. Which one of you is in charge?"

An assortment of youths, lounging, boozing, and dicing away the afternoon stared at him in slack-jawed surprise. A few scrambled for weapons, but most didn't move. They seemed unable to believe a single man would be foolish enough to enter their hideout uninvited.

"Word is, the Razorhides are the meanest gang on the wharf," continued the warlock. His back brushed a wall.

He hoped it didn't conceal anyone else good with a knife. "Now that I found you, I'd like to make a deal."

The Razorhides recovered from their surprise. Like petals opening at dawn, blades appeared in their grubby hands.

The warlock forced a smile in order to demonstrate confidence. This was where his plan would be tested. He'd foreseen the gang's armed reaction—counted on it, even. But facing a small sea of glinting blades was different from imagining it. And the Razorhides had a reputation on the wharf. Those who crossed them ended up dead, usually with body parts strewn along the docks as a warning to merchants and freelance thieves.

“You’re paying attention. Good,” said Japheth, trying to make his voice light. “So, who’s your leader? One of you? A merchant up in Old Town? Maybe a sergeant of the militia? Yes? No?”

Silence met him. Japheth girded himself for what he knew would come next.

“I’m the one you want,” said a tall young man, stepping forward. He was twenty-odd years old but scarred and tattooed with more hard living than most could claim in double that span. According to one story, this bastard had killed a whole family in their home by sealing them in and then burning the structure down. “I’m Dherk. The Razorhides do what I say. What’s it to—”

Japheth muttered a spell, one of the few he hadn’t got from the Lord of Bats. An iron spear appeared in Japheth’s right hand, glowing cherry red with infernal heat. The warlock hurled it. The spear transfixing Dherk’s left thigh through his spiky leather armor, nailing him to the brewery’s dusty plank floor.

A scream of surprise burst from Dherk. Blood trickled from his impaled leg.

“You’re wrong,” Japheth yelled over Dherk’s outburst and shouts from the others. “I lead the Razorhides.

Starting today. Understand?”

“Get this bloodlicking sheepstraddler!” screamed Dherk as tears of pain glistened on his cheek.

So much for bluffing, thought Japheth. He produced from his cloak a whorled nautilus shell on a hemp cord. It represented a little extra insurance he’d prepared in case the Razorhides proved defiant.

Japheth blew on the shell. In answer, something smashed at the front doors of the abandoned brewery. Several heads swung nervously to regard the entrance.

The warlock said, “I didn’t come alone. In fact, a friend of mine is at the door—”

A crossbow quarrel whistled toward him. His cloak caught the bolt and pulled it noiselessly out of the world before it found his flesh, but he dropped the nautilus amulet.

A tough charged Japheth, a dagger in each hand.

The warlock snatched up the shell, but he'd misjudged the dagger-wielder's distance. The kid was on him.

One blade drew a line of blood down Japheth's left forearm, but his cloak protected him against the thrust of the other. He snarled at the unexpected pain. Then he raised the nautilus shell and yelled, "Come to me!" The shell sounded of its own accord in his hand.

Another crash sounded at the entrance. This time, light from the outer hall spilled in as the door came off its hinges.

A thing stood in the vestibule beyond the broken doors.

Japheth had spent the previous few days crafting a construct from driftwood and portside debris. It was simple and relatively fragile as such things went, but impressive looking. With its crown of smashed shells, body of dirt and fish teeth, and cloak of sea mist, it looked immensely threatening. Terrifying, even.

A murmur of fear swept the Razorhides. Perfect! They were primed.

The warlock swirled his cloak in the dagger wielder's face, distracting the kid so Japheth could retreat a step. A step was all he needed.

Japheth opened his mouth wide, releasing a devastating shout that cracked the stone column behind him, splintered the wood at his feet, and abraded the flesh of the advancing mass of gang members. A fiery image accompanied the blast, some sort of bat-winged, burning angel pulling itself free from a cavern lair.

The screams of fear, issuing loudest of all from the pinned Dherk, signaled to Japheth the fight was over. Many Razorhides had been pushed back by the strength of his terrible howl, a spell of mind-piercing fear he'd gleaned from his reluctant patron. Some had fallen over. One,

nearest the driftwood scarecrow standing in the doorway, had fainted dead away.

"As I was explaining," said Japheth, "I am your new leader." He tucked the nautilus shell away in his cloak.

Several heads nodded. He watched them for clues they were playing him. But no—he judged they were truly cowed.

"Dherk is out, and I'm in. Although... if he plays his cards right, he'll remain second in command."

He fixed Dherk with a hard look, daring the man to order another attack. The conjured iron spear that pinned Dherk to the floor dissipated. The deposed leader remained sitting, his eyes wide.

"S-second?" stuttered Dherk.

"Yes. They'll answer to you. You answer to me. And what I want is very simple: tribute."

"Tribute?" said Dherk. Japheth almost felt sorry for the gang leader, until he remembered the burning family.

"Yes. Tribute. Think of me as your benevolent bandit king. You're my duke, and these others... my knights. You fellows steal for your food and comforts. As your new king, you owe me a cut. Let's say, oh, how about thirty percent of your daily take in coin?"

Gasps issued from the throng. Japheth waited a moment, his head cocked, but no dissent was voiced.

"See? Already we're off to a promising start! I'll come by once a day to pick up my cut. If I find you are cheating me... Well, don't. Otherwise..." Japheth pointed to the scarecrow. "I'm leaving my friend behind. He'll help you guard your lair. But it'll also watch you. Disappoint me, and I'll know."

Japheth met Dherk's eyes. Dherk jerked his head down in a frightened nod.

"And while you're at it... find me a tin of traveler's dust. I'm a little light."

Japheth strolled through the wide doors of the Lorious Inn, his hands clutching a purse heavy with coin. A down payment on his tribute, courtesy of the Razorhides.

The Lorious was one of the finer establishments in Veltalar, catering to a clientele of wealthy ship captains, successful merchants, and high-stakes players who believed they won more often than they lost at various games of chance the inn featured. As such, the place was a destination of choice for those with more coin than sense.

Laughter, cursing, and the sounds of shuffling cards and bone dice issued from the game room just off the Lorious's comfortable entrance hall.

Japheth glanced in. The wide chamber was packed, as usual. Elegantly dressed and flush-faced people stooped over tables draped in red fabric. Men with flamboyant kerchiefs patted sweating faces, some laughing, others cursing. Women in elegant gowns and tailored, elbow-length gloves watched dealers and croupiers for any advantage. It didn't matter whether the sun was in the sky or not—all light within the Lorious was magically provided. It wouldn't do for a wealthy merchant on a winning streak to note the approaching dawn and walk away from a game before his coin pouch was empty. Japheth wondered, not for the first time, what drove them to keep laying down wager after wager until their pockets were empty and their ships or homes were pledged to pay off imprudent bets. More fortunes were lost in the Lorious than were made.

The warlock speculated the rush a gambler experienced making a bet was akin to his own craving for the red crystals. Of course, casting the bones looking for double sevens wasn't the death sentence a traveler on the crimson road eventually, faced.

Japheth shook off the association, as well as the temptation to try his luck at the table with the purse he held just to see what might happen.

No, he decided. He wouldn't chance the first installment of his tribute in there. He moved deeper into the Lorious.

The wide portico of the saloon's entrance was the next enticement. Within, patrons briefly rested from the exuberant highs and chin-trembling lows of the game chamber with the aid of popular and bizarre drinks.

Spirits, ciders, and wines of both rare and common vintage flowed. Bundles of burning herbs in dark leaf wrappers and water pipes hazed the room with pale blue smoke.

He had no time for the camaraderie of the saloon either. He walked past.

It cost Japheth five gold coins a day to rent the adjoining rooms he maintained in the luxury inn, a sum more than double what an opulent suite normally went for. But the warlock needed privacy to complete his task. He could have paid much less in nearly any other lodge, but seclusion wasn't cheap, especially when it had to be found quickly.

The Lorious offered both unquestioned privacy and more than a modicum of security. An extraordinary amount of coin passed through the establishment's halls. It could not afford to allow its guests to become the victims of thievery. So long as a visitor did not steal and did not cheat—or get caught at either—the proprietors were happy to allow paying customers all the privacy they required, no matter the deviant habits some were rumored to enjoy. The warlock doubted any had accumulated as many rumors as him in so short a time.

He'd heard the staff whisper he was a spy from Thay sent to keep tabs on Veltalar, or perhaps on the Red Wizard enclave that operated in the city outside of Thay's purview. One fellow had caught a chlorine whiff emerging from the warlock's suite and had sworn up and down Japheth was trying to reanimate the corpse of a rich heiress.

The warlock complained to the Lorious's management about that one and got him dismissed. A few rumors to

maintain an air of mystery to keep folks away was one thing. Inciting local authorities with crazy lies about zombie uprisings was counterproductive.

To achieve his end, he'd accumulated all sorts of odds and ends, some of which were bulky, loud, smelly, or all three. He'd tried to transfer these components into his chamber without causing undue commotion, but he hadn't been entirely successful.

Japheth passed down a hallway lined with golden lamps and tapestries. A plaque indicated the tapestries were looted from the ruins of Mulhorand. This would impress most guests with coin enough to stay in the most expensive suite the inn had to offer. The warlock didn't much care.

As dearly as he paid for his privacy, in truth, solitude was the least of his expenses. His task required the acquisition of costly components, items more expensive even than illicit drugs, especially in uncertain times.

Japheth had quickly run through his resources merely researching what might be required. He'd nearly despaired, until a rhymester in the saloon related a story of a bandit lord who deviled the city before the Spellplague.

The warlock spent two days without sleep chasing down wharf drunks, roustabouts, and petty thieves, learning bit by bit the various minor and major players of the Veltalar underworld. Every city concealed some amount of corruption just beneath its surface. Veltalar was no different. He finally discovered where the Razorhides made their lair.

Truth to tell, he was surprised how soft they turned out to be. Some of the stories indicated he might have been in for a desperate fight. But no.

He doubted his new gang leader role would survive more than a few tendays. But it didn't need to last forever— only long enough to pay for what he needed. Expensive things like green dragon scales. The warlock reached the finely adorned but heavily reinforced door of his suite. He put the

iron key into the lock, rotated it three times to the left and once right. A click, and he was in. The door creaked shut behind him.

The main room was adrift in tomes. Books of every size lay in untidy heaps, many open to a page Japheth had briefly perused before tossing it aside to refer to the next. Titles picked out in various scripts winked amid the clutter, including Godren's Ritual of Waking, Breaking the Spell, and Recalling the Soul. Much of the warlock's funds had gone into renting the tomes from private collections in Veltalar.

Japheth produced a second key and slid it into the massive door guarding the suite's vault. The door was iron with a core of lead. The vault was a perk offered by the Lorious to guests willing to pay a little more for security. Japheth worked the key and heard the interior lock's dull thud as the bolts pulled back. Despite the door's weight, it was well balanced and opened smoothly.

A chorus of barks greeted the warlock. Then appeared a grinning canine head, followed by a wriggling black body and a waving tail.

"Lucky, you keeping our girl safe? Yes? Good boy!"

He reached down and ruffled the dog's ears. The tempo of its tail increased—a far cry from Luckyk reaction when Japheth had first claimed the dog's charge. The beast had guarded his mistress well on that forlorn island anchorage. Too well. When Japheth appeared from the folds of his cloak, Lucky had snarled and leaped. The scar on the back of Japheth's hand was from that bite.

He couldn't fault the beast for being protective. He was just grateful the loyal animal had recognized him and stood down. If he'd been forced to hurt the dog... Well, it hadn't come to that.

The vault's floor was smooth marble, with walls and ceiling to match. Two circular diagrams were engraved on

the floor and inlaid with silver. Japheth had inscribed them himself.

Anusha Marhana's travel chest was set in the larger circle.

Japheth walked to the edge and gazed into it. There she lay, her eyes closed and her breathing slow and measured. As if she were merely sleeping.

A familiar pang clutched his chest. "I'm back, Anusha. I got what I needed."

She didn't respond.

Anusha's features were delicate but drawn. Her arms lay at her sides. Despite how her hands lay in limp curls, they seemed perfect. He knew he'd had too much time to brood over her, but the damage was done.

He was smitten.

He took one of her hands and pressed the palm to his cheek.

The cadence of her breathing didn't change, but his did. "Not much longer. You'll see."

The smaller silver circle on the floor was inscribed so that it barely intersected the larger one. An oak stand rose from its center. On the stand rested an iron birdcage. The cage's bars were rusted, but they were still strong. The cage trapped a spherical object about the size of a human head. The trapped globe was black over most of its surface, save for the purplish red iris that appeared when the object's lids snapped wide, as they did every so often according to no schedule Japheth could discern. Every time the eye opened, the warlock flinched.

The Dreamheart.

It was the disembodied eye of horror itself. He'd layered it with rituals, attempting to blind the thing's gaze. He didn't know how effective his workings had been.

Japheth had devised the iron cage to contain the relic. The cage also gave him a way to handle the Dreamheart

without laying his hands along its cold and somehow slick surface.

He'd touched it once, when he'd stolen it from Raidon's sword. That contact had granted Japheth the strength to travel miles through his cloak, when yards were the normal limit of the cloak's ability. The touch had also shown the warlock disturbing images, ones he'd tried to block. But those visions still seeped in and coiled around his dreams, clamoring for his attention during the night.

Japheth didn't have time to listen to their entreaties. He had too much to do already. Plus, based on what he'd seen of the Dreamheart's previous two wielders, the secrets of power offered by the relic came with a price of corruption. If he could come up with some way to protect his mind from that effect while at the same time accessing the relic's powers, well, that would be something else. When he had more time, he'd think on that.

With Anusha's hand still in his own, Japheth addressed the Dreamheart rather than the woman beside him.

"Anusha? If you can hear me in there, stay strong! I'll get you out of there, love. Soon!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren on the Sea of Fallen Stars

Raidon Kane stood on the forecastle of Green Siren. Beyond the ship's railing, the sea stretched away, dappled with aquamarine rollers.

A sandbag suspended at waist height claimed Raidon's attention. He checked the ropes one last time to make sure it was secure.

Good.

The monk set his shoulders, then twisted in the opposite direction. His elbow snapped around and hit the bag.

Sand puffed with the stinging blow.

"That should do," he said.

Raidon jabbed the bag with his left fist, rotating his arm so the top of his clenched hand was horizontal to the target as it struck. As his fist snapped back to guard his face, he leaned away, bringing his right hip over. His leg followed, smashing into the bag like an iron ball on a swinging flail.

The half-elf assaulted the defenseless bag with a flurry of kicks, knees, flying elbows, and straight punches.

Though his kicks seemed lazy and his punches almost casual, the makeshift target popped with each strike.

The simplest forms were most illusive, requiring the greatest subtlety of muscle coordination to achieve surprising power: it was a truism he always strove to keep in mind.

Sweat ran across the stylized tree inked across his chest, but the drops glittered and steamed away. Raidon relaxed wholly to his forms, his body moving in ever smoother, more circular movements. His mind followed, dissolving into the exertion. His focus was nearly complete, yet a sliver of anxiety persisted.

He couldn't forget the fiasco a tenday earlier.

He recalled, for the hundredth time, how the warlock Japheth had stepped backward into the darkness of his cloak and vanished, taking the Dreamheart with him.

The monk gritted his teeth. His focus wavered.

Raidon tried to blink away the image of the warlock's thievery. But frustration and anger claimed him. His concentration broke.

He lashed the sand-filled rucksack with a kick so vicious both hemp tethers snapped. The bag arced out over the sea. It struck the water, and in less than a heartbeat, the sack was pulled under. Gone.

Just like Japheth and the Dreamheart.

Raidon's hands clenched tighter. An urge to break something vital to the ship's integrity overwhelmed him.

As he sized up the mainmast as a potential target, his upper chest prickled. He looked down at the Cerulean Sign.

The half-elf ran a hand across the scar's face. The barest of tugs pulled him around until he faced starboard. The miniscule pull wasn't entirely unfamiliar, he realized he'd felt it for some time. Prior to that moment, however, the sensation had been too slight for him to mark. He knew what it signified.

"The Dreamheart lies that way." The Cerulean Sign did not speak to him as Cynosure had, or as Angul sometimes did when he wielded it. The Sign had no mind. But it could impart knowledge, at least when he took the time to pay attention.

His anger burned out. Behind it lay the placid, accepting calm he had once cultivated and relied on for his every need. His focus felt like a shadow compared to wrath's passions.

Raidon returned to the cabin the Green Siren's captain had set aside for him. Japheth's old room.

He entered and drew the bolt. His perspiring body was already air-drying. He took a moment to dampen a cloth

from the water basin to freshen up, then slipped into a clean silk shirt.

He made to leave, then paused to regard his cot. He flipped the blanket aside, revealing Angul. It hissed at him.

Blue-tinged smoke curled from the blade's span as the sword seared the coverlet beneath it.

"If you burn through to the sea, you'll rust," said Raidon. The blade was furious at the half-elf's refusal to gird the sword to his belt. He'd separated himself from Angul rather than allow the sword to ride his hip. Then he'd locked the blade in his cabin, mainly for the safety of the scofflaw privateers crewing the ship. Angul would burn the freebooters to drifting soot regardless of consequence.

A spit of fire leaped from the blade for Raidon's eyes. He twisted away, but the flame dissipated before it reached his face. Angul, for all its airs of righteous purity, often acted like a spoiled child.

That comparison immediately brought to mind Ailyn. A girl with dark hair and happy eyes. In his imagination, she cradled a kitten awkwardly in her tiny hands, but she was laughing. He'd been sure the girl was going to drop the kitten on its head! He felt guilty recalling it.

Especially now that his daughter was dead.

He shook his head. He said to the blade, "I know where to find the Dreamheart. It and Japheth are not far away.

When I find them, I shall take you up again, Angul."

If anything, the blade burned more violently. Or more petulantly. Angul preferred to be in control.

The monk sighed, covered the blade, and left.

On the quarterdeck, Raidon spied Captain Thoster in earnest conversation with the wizard Seren. He could guess their topic. The woman was determined to leave the pirate ship and its troubles far behind.

The monk stepped forward, catching only the last half of the shipmaster's words.

“... strangest dream last night,” said Thoster. “That ghost girl who haunted the ship tried to tell me something, but I couldn’t hear her. Spooky.”

Seren said, “Don’t change the subject with your dreams from indigestion. Just hand over what you owe me, and I’ll be on my way.”

“On your way where? We’re at sea, and I ain’t turning the Siren toward whatever port you fancy. I’ve a ship to run and schedules to keep.”

The wizard smirked. “What port are you making for, Captain? Do you even know? I’ll get off there. I don’t care if it’s Lyrabar, Urmlaspyr, or Laothkund the Drowned.”

The captain noticed the monk.

“Raidon!” said Thoster. “I saw you beating the tar out of a sandbag. Did you teach it some manners?”

“Captain Thoster, I have a fix on the Dreamheart.”

The captain said, “Hah! I knew you’d find that godsforsaken rock.”

“Are you ready to fulfill your promise?”

“To help you destroy it? Of course! Didn’t I already say so?”

Raidon studied the captain’s eyelids, the muscles in his upper lip, and the tension between his eyes. Either the captain was pulling off a particularly masterful lie, or he spoke the truth.

Of course, Thoster was a pirate. Lying likely came as easily as swearing to the man. “I’m glad,” Raidon said.

“So, where to?”

“Japheth lies to the east. We’ll find him in one of Aglarond’s port cities. Velprintalar, ..”

Seren said, “Most call that port Veltalar now.”

Raidon paused, sensing the influence from his Sign resonating with the shorter word. “Veltalar. That sounds right. Yes, let’s make for that port, Captain.”

Seren continued, “But how could you possibly know that? Have you been doing rituals in your cabin? I doubt you’ve

suddenly mastered the arts of magecraft.”

Raidon tapped his chest. He said, “The Cerulean Sign suffices.”

“Veltalar,” mused the wizard. “How fortuitous. I know a little something of the city. I’ll disembark there.”

Raidon looked at the woman. He remembered how efficacious her spells proved when they faced Gethshemeth and its kuo-toa. He didn’t want to lose her.

“Seren,” he said, “as I told the captain, I would welcome any and all aid.”

She sneered. “That’s not my style. Pay me enough, and maybe I’ll consider it. Otherwise you’re on your own.”

The captain laughed and clapped Raidon on the shoulder. “She’s out of my employ. Good riddance.”

“Seren, if you help me find Japheth and secure what he stole, I can provide you with all the gold you could ever want,” Raidon promised.

“How’s that?”

“When I’ve taken care of the warlock, I will devote myself to gathering a great treasure from the plaguelands scattered across Faerun. More than a few treasure vaults of overwhelmed nations lie undiscovered by salvagers and dragons.”

Seren breathed out. She scowled, but Raidon saw something kindle in her eyes.

She said, “Tell me more, Raidon.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) New Sarshel, Impiltur

Behroun Marhana hunched over the small green jewel. The lamp burning beside his desk lent the crystal a malevolent glitter as he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. His face was a mask of indecision.

Behroun crouched on the edge of his white leather chair. It was the least comfortable position he might have found on the luxurious seat, but it suited the moment.

"Should I break it?" The man said, his voice hoarse. It wasn't the first such entreaty he'd made that day. "It'd be so easy to hammer you into a thousand pieces of sand..."

The tiny jewel was indifferent to Behroun's threat.

He was the sole owner of Marhana Shipping. He was one of the Grand Councilors steering New Sarshel's destiny. Both positions lent Lord Marhana incredible privileges and power. He was used to making hard choices. Yet this one was beyond him.

Behroun bellowed his frustration. He swept his desktop clear of its parchments, quills, and small devices useful for plotting nautical routes.

The crash and tinkle of breaking glass calmed him.

He got up from his chair and walked to the side of the desk opposite the lamp. He pushed aside an artfully stuffed osprey on a mounting rod. One of its wings hung broken. He bent and retrieved the jeweler's hammer he'd just brushed off his desk.

He straightened, hammer in one hand, emerald pact stone in the other. In the silver -framed mirror by the door, he looked like someone who'd just made an important decision.

"I wonder what you'll say when the Lord of Bats finds you, Japheth, whelp of a Sembian beggar!"

He raised the hammer.

Indecision slithered back onto Behroun's face. His shoulders slumped.

As satisfying as it would be to feel the green stone crack, the act wouldn't ultimately serve him. Destroying the pact stone would rob Behroun of his last pretense of leverage. Not merely leverage over the warlock Japheth, but also with his allies, if they could be called that.

The moment the emerald was smashed, the Lord of Bats would find and destroy Japheth. With the warlock gone, there was no way Behroun could claim the Dreamheart for himself. Only in the act of destroying the stone would Behroun wield power. In that very instant, he'd be the fulcrum.

The next moment, he'd hold a handful of ashes.

Behroun suspected all the extraordinary things Neifion promised in return for the jewel's destruction were fabrications, lies meant to entice, not to be made good on.

On the other hand, Lord Marhana controlled Japheth by threatening to destroy his pact stone. A threat that daily seemed less and less credible.

The threat meant nothing if he could not bring himself to follow through, especially if following through left him worse off than before, never mind its effect on the warlock.

"No. Not yet," he whispered.

Behroun dropped the hammer into his vest pocket.

His reflection in the mirror no longer showed a decisive man. Instead, it showed someone caught between two tempests. The mirror contained a tiny flaw that lent a faint distortion to his features, a blur he'd learned to ignore years before. At that moment, however, his visage reminded him of a dream he'd had the previous night. He'd completely forgotten it.

He'd dreamed of his half sister, Anusha. An unsettling dream—no wonder he'd put it from his mind.

Anusha was standing in a shadowed space. Hints of pillars tall as mountains shadowed away into the distance behind her. The floor was pocked like a honeycomb. Every surface was slicked with a phosphorescent gleam whose color Behroun couldn't quite recall, but which made him feel sick to his stomach nonetheless. Slimy, snail-like humps crawled here and there, some the size of men, others far larger.

Anusha stood at the edge of the darkness, limned in greenish vapor.

His half sister yelled to him, desperate. What was it? Her mouth moved, but Behroun heard no sound. She seemed terrified. Of what? Was she looking at him? No, she was looking beyond him, reaching for something.

Tears leaked from her eyes. He couldn't hear her voice, but her lips moved as she repeated a phrase over and over. Something about a... key? The vapor behind Anusha churned. He glimpsed something, a single fantastic image of some squirming bulk.

The uncertain shape snatched Anusha back into a void of darkness.

He'd woken, though at first he'd been unable to distinguish the shadows of the dream from his lightless bedroom, so suddenly was he thrust into heart-thudding wakefulness. His trembling hands had relit the candle next to his bed, eager for the reassurance of the warm yellow glow.

And then he'd fallen back to sleep and forgotten the dream entirely.

How had such a nightmare slipped from his memory until now? Behroun shuddered.

It was foolishness anyway. His half sister was safe. He'd bundled her off to the country house, lest some of his adversaries on the New Sarshel Grand Council try to eliminate her.

Not that he would be sorry to see the woman gone. She was a snotty problem who'd given him nothing but trouble.

But he'd mourn the loss of what she provided him. Through her, his claim to the Marhana family name had at least the hint of legitimacy. Her death was a complication he didn't need at the moment.

He shook off the dream. Anusha was safe, he was certain. She'd packed her travel chest as he'd ordered. That had been the last he'd seen of her. No doubt his spoiled half sister had already forgotten the reason he'd sent her away.

He reflected on the mystery of how dreams mixed real events with imagined scenes. Horrors such as those he'd glimpsed in the dream were outside his experience... but he could guess the origin of the nightmarish images.

Now that Malyanna had come to live at the mansion, things in New Sarshel had changed.

Behroun left his office. He slipped the pact stone into the locket he wore like an amulet around his neck. It had a secret clasp that only he knew the trick of opening. Its star-iron body would keep any treasure safe, even from a mad eladrin noble exiled from the Feywild.

The hunting bay of a hound echoed through the house.

As Lord Marhana tramped down into the subterranean wine vault, the baying grew louder. The sound indicated Malyanna was at her games again. Despite how her presence strengthened Behroun's position in New Sarshel, her methods sometimes appalled him.

An oak door reinforced with iron bars stood ajar at the bottom of the stairs. Behroun frowned, passed through the door, and closed it behind him. He locked it with a key from his tunic. It wouldn't do for Malyanna's latest toy to escape back into the city. The eladrin noble might think the possibility added extra spice to her game, but the mere thought of such an escape drew an acid pang of alarm from Behroun's gut. For a man so young, his digestion had grown painfully troublesome.

His hand automatically reached up to feel the amulet under his shirt. He hated having to wear it concealed, but Malyanna knew he kept the warlock's pact stone within it. The woman's moods were so impenetrable... he was afraid she might simply rip it from him if the thought crossed her mind, even though he was certain she would not figure out how to open it. Mostly certain.

Behroun tramped farther into the dank, niche-lined catacombs. Instead of moldering bones, the shelves on each side were half filled with grape vintages bottled in heavy smoked glass.

Most of it had probably turned to vinegar years earlier, he mused. He allowed his hand to trail across a hand-lettered label, brushing off a decade of dust. What did it say? He grunted in disgust. The script was in a language he didn't know or even recognize the name for.

The bay of the hunting mastiff resounded through the narrow corridor, so loud that he wondered if he had become the quarry.

"By the gods, I wish I'd never thrown in with her!" he muttered. When he'd met Malyanna, she seemed incidental to his plan, an ally of chance. And someone with strengths too potent to ignore. She'd claimed she was an exile from a Feywild kingdom who needed his aid to reclaim her rightful throne.

Lately he wondered if it wasn't she who had found him rather than the other way around. Malyanna had somehow known he was on the cusp of retrieving the relic. She never treated him with all that much respect, even back when he'd thought he was the one calling the shots. And she never talked about the kingdom she was supposedly trying to reclaim either.

Sometime in the last few tendays, their roles had reversed. Behroun couldn't put his finger on exactly when. His abilities were mostly bureaucratic, while the waves of bone-chilling winter that rolled away from her spoke of a

strength more potent, one that made him afraid. He should have known what would happen the moment the eladrin noble approached him.

He moved into a larger vestibule. It was lit by rows of candles lining catacomb shelves. A block of cracked stone sat in the center of the chamber. Besides the one he entered through, three other archways opened on darkness.

Behroun paused, not really seeing the chamber. He wondered, not for the first time, if Malyanna wanted the Dreamheart. She'd never said so, but...

He murmured, "I wonder if every word from her mouth is a lie?"

"Talking to yourself again, Lord Marhana?"

Behroun gasped.

A woman reclined on a narrow balcony above the vestibule. Her slender limbs and graceful poise transcended mere humanity. Her white skin glowed like moonlight, and her eyes were coal.

She was an eladrin noble, an entity who surpassed the powers of humans and mortal fey alike. One thing was sure—she was old. By her stray words and stories, he'd learned she had lived hundreds of years at least. She had piled on more winters than her kin in Faerun managed, despite her youthful skin.

"Did you hear my question?" she said, gazing down at him as a sated cat might eye a skittering mouse.

"Ahem," coughed Behroun. He'd been staring at her. "I was considering our problem—"

"Hold!" she interrupted, her voice dagger sharp. "My entertainment is drawing to a close. Do not distract me!"

A scream of hunger splintered Behroun's facade of confidence. It was the sound of a hunting beast, but not one born in the mortal world. Comprehension dawned. "Is that thing loose in here?" he choked out.

Malyanna snorted. "Of course, what else?"

Lord Marhana stumbled to the wall beneath the balcony. He scrabbled for a grip, finding purchase in dusty crevices for fingertips only. He levered himself up half a foot. His left boot discovered a toehold, but his right scratched ineffectually at the smooth stone.

The hungry bay echoed through the chamber again, its volume redoubled.

Behroun pulled himself higher, but a tremble in his left thigh grew quickly into a full -scale shake. He was unused to such effort.

"Pull me up!" he gasped.

The eladrin spared him a glance, her expression unreadable. She didn't move.

Behroun moaned. He was to be the entertainment! "Malyanna, please—"

The woman leaned down and extended a pale hand. Behroun grasped it. Her fingers were icicles, but he didn't let go. She pulled him up with little effort or attention. Her eyes were back on the three lightless exits. She was breathing harder, but he guessed it was from excitement, not exertion. When he pulled free of her grasp, his hand tingled as if waking from frostbite.

A man burst from one of the dark archways. The fellow's eyes rolled in his head like a fire-maddened stallion.

He was panting something, over and over—a prayer perhaps. If Lord Marhana hadn't known the man well, he doubted he would have recognized the crying, scratched, terrified man as Councilor Yenech, the second most feared and hated administrator in New Sarshel.

That could be me, Behroun thought. Before all was said and done, it might be. A sliver of pity flared in Lord Marhana's chest for Yenech.

The councilor ceased his headlong flight through the darkness. Though the light must have hurt his eyes, having come so recently out of unrelieved darkness, the man stared up at them as if they were his salvation.

"I knew the light would draw him here," murmured Malyanna. "Perfect."

Yenech flinched. His gaze slid off the woman and focused on Behroun.

"Lord Marhana!" yelled the councilor. "Help me!" Behroun looked away.

Yenech's scream of terror pulled his eyes back a heartbeat later.

Something else was in the room. A shadow with the outline of a large dog. Its coat was smooth as oil and just as black. But its teeth were white. A growl rent the air. The mastiffs prey soiled himself.

The eladrin had earlier described her pet to Behroun. She said it was a beast that could pursue its quarry no matter how far it fled, even should that quarry cross into realms apart from the mortal world. As long as that realm contained some bit of shadow, the mastiff would find a way in, and from there a path to its target. Councilor Yenech didn't manage another ten steps before the mastiff was on him, bearing the man down to the stone floor. Its jaws seized onto the back of the wailing man's head. It shook Yenech like a rag doll. The wailing scream cut off the moment the administrator's neck snapped.

Malyanna drew in a sharp breath. An uncharacteristic flush warmed her skin. Her eyes didn't leave her pet as it began to feast on the fruits of its kill, but she said, "One less obstruction to your rule in Impiltur, Lord Marhana.

Isn't it grand?"

The smell of blood mixed with the odor of excrement turned Behroun's stomach. More than anything else, he wanted to gag. He closed his eyes instead and tried to gain control of his breathing and thundering heart.

"Yes," he finally managed, his voice hoarse. "When I do so, and you become my, um, queen... then you'll fulfill the requirement of your exile. You'll be able return to the

Feywild kingdom and rule once more. Perhaps we do not even need the relic.”

The eladrin’s laughter was like hail on tile roofing.

“You amuse me, Behroun. I will remember that, when everything is through. But enough with your jokes.

“Tell me, where is the Dreamheart?”

“Thoster has communicated with me—he’s still loyal, at least. I think... Anyhow, the captain says the warlock stole it.”

“And where is Japheth? Isn’t he under your thumb?”

“Yes. Well. He hasn’t responded to my last few messages.

“But I’m sure it’s only a matter of time—”

“Destroy the pact stone,” interrupted Malyanna. “Then the Lord of Bats will lead us to the traitor, and thus to the Dreamheart.”

Behroun said, “I could do that, yes. But consider! If we do what you say, we risk Neifion gaining your trinket. Do you trust him not to take it for himself, once he is freed of all constraint?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed with calculation. She didn’t respond.

He said, “I remain in contact with Captain Thoster. His , last communique indicates the monk from Telflamm, named Raidon Kane, will lead us to Japheth.”

Malyanna remained quiet a moment longer, then said, “We shall try your way, Lord Marhana. But I swear by the Citadel of the Outer Void, if you can’t locate the warlock i soon, I will break the pact stone myself.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Veltalar, Aglarond

Japheth stood in a shadowed, many-roomed space slicked with glowing slime. Shadows flowed as if oil in dank hollows. The rancid odor of rotting fish stung his eyes and nostrils.

He couldn't recall how he'd come to be there.

A shuffling step scraped behind him. Japheth spun around, or tried to. He felt clumsy and disoriented. His foot caught on a rock spur, and he sprawled onto the rough floor.

He craned his neck around and saw a woman. A woman he knew—

"Anusha!" he called.

She stood in a vast, misty space. But she wasn't alone. Shapes made indistinct by the roiling fog shuddered and crept across the floor.

He stumbled to his feet. Before he could run to Anusha, one of the shapes behind the woman moved close enough that Japheth was able to see it.

A fine haze of mucus haloed a gelatinous bulk. He squinted, his mind trying to fit some previously encountered shape to it. It was a gruesome slug grown monstrously large—a slug with tentacles.

It slid closer, and Japheth saw it regarded him with three scarlet eyes. A tooth-studded tongue coiled forth from its lipless mouth and rasped along the floor. Nausea stirred in his gut.

He returned his regard to Anusha. Her eyes had never left him. They were desperate with some need. Her hands reached out. Her lips moved, though Japheth heard nothing.

"What?" He held out his hands. "Tell me what's wrong!"

She shook her head and looked up, above and behind him. Tears traced lines down her cheeks. Her lips moved once more, but it was as if she were trapped behind crystal. "Tell me!" Japheth yelled. He stepped closer, but his feet seemed frozen in mud. He leaned, trying to touch her outstretched fingers, but she was too far.

The vapor behind Anusha churned. An eye the size of a house blinked open. Then five more. Their reddish glow pierced the fog like bonfires. All of them stared at Anusha with unmasked hunger.

Japheth startled awake, one flailing hand knocking the pile of tomes next to his bed crashing to the floor.

He sat up and looked at the vault door. Lucky lay before it. The dog whined and raised his head from folded paws. His ears twitched forward with nervous curiosity.

The door to the vault was ajar!

The warlock rolled from his bed and charged into the vault, sending another stack of books tumbling.

Anusha lay sleeping in her travel chest. She hadn't moved. As Japheth's breathing slowed, he recalled leaving the vault door open on purpose so he could keep watch over her as she slept. He'd fallen asleep before closing it again.

He wasn't getting enough sleep, and it was starting to show. He was getting sloppy. Forgetting things.

Japheth walked to the chest. "Hope you slept better than me," he said.

The woman remained as quiescent as ever, her breath coming in slow but measured waves.

Japheth sighed. Just a dream, it seemed, though a nasty one all the same.

"Today's the day," he confided. "I've got everything I need. You'll wake this time, I'm certain."

Actually, he wasn't, but if any part of her could hear his words, he wanted to be reassuring.

Which was why he'd never voiced his terrible remorse. The image of a silver vial in her slack hand haunted him.

When he'd found her on the beach in her travel chest guarded by Lucky, it was obvious she'd imbibed the liquid.

She'd been unable to wake up and escape the Dreamheart's pull thanks to Japheth's own elixir of sleep. The guilt rose up like gorge, trying to strangle him.

The creatures he'd seen in his dream earlier were probably manifestations of his guilt.

Doubt assailed him: was he even worthy of her?

Events demonstrated merely being around him was dangerous. Worse, his predilection for taking forbidden substances could ensnare others besides himself—even someone like Anusha. Once she realized his part in her situation, Anusha might well come to hate him.

It was a thought too cruel for him to ponder. The only thing he could do was try to prove himself to her. Prove that despite all his shortcomings, he would do anything for her.

Starting with rescuing her.

He turned away from Anusha and regarded the slender birchwood podium he'd dragged into the vault the previous evening. On it lay several arcane components: a rod, a scroll case, a tome, an iron ring, and a vial of green dust. His nautilus shell hung from its hemp cord off one side of the podium.

Except for the shell, he would use each of the items—one way or another—in the rituals he contemplated. He began to sort through them.

The scroll case contained a ritual of curse breaking more potent than any Japheth had previously tried.

The tome contained a ritual similar to that penned on the scroll, but one that dealt more specifically with relieving maladies of the mind.

The rod was carved of jade. It had been blessed by a priest of Kelemvor who'd returned to awareness after spending a full ten years in a holy trance.

The dust in the vial was powdered dragon scales, collected from the lair of a green dragon whose ammoniac odor was so pungent some claimed it could wake the recently dead.

The iron ring was the cheapest of the assembled items, but the most precious to him. He'd wound several strands of Anusha's dark hair around it, which he hoped would allow him to trace her soul wherever it had fled.

Japheth wasn't sure which of the two rituals, the one on the scroll or the one in the tome, was the one he needed.

He figured he would try both, starting with the cure for curses. The Dreamheart was like a curse made manifest.

He glanced back at Anusha. "One other component I need too, if I'm going to have any chance of finding your dream. I'm sorry..."

The warlock pulled a small object from the folds of his cloak. It was shaped somewhat like a clamshell, but the delicate hinges and miniature clasp revealed it to be manmade. It resembled a noblewoman's silver compact used to hold a bit of rouge, or perhaps something an ostentatious merchant would use to keep loose pipeweed. For Japheth, it was a secure container for a substance whose sale was banned in most of western Faerun. For good reason, desire for it could overmaster the minds of paupers, wizards, and kings alike. He was fortunate the Razorthides dealt in the vile substance.

His hands trembled as he held the container.

Japheth wondered if traveler's dust was really necessary for a successful ritual, or if he was just using it as an excuse to indulge.

Moisture fled his mouth as he considered. Maybe he should take just half a crystal now, before he started the ritual. It would probably be all right. In fact, it might help matters... no. He closed his eyes and drew in a calming breath.

“Not yet,” he remonstrated, gently placing the compact on the edge of the podium.

First the powdered dragon scales. He opened the container. The initial whiff stung his eyes and burned his nostrils. Steeling himself, he carefully dribbled the powder out in a line thin enough to completely encircle Anusha’s travel chest, using the silver circle inscribed on the floor as a guide. The smell of chlorine filled the room. Lucky whined and retreated from the chamber—the odor was too much for the dog.

Japheth set aside the emptied container. He pulled the scroll out of its case and studied the cramped letters. The overwhelming odor tried to claw down his throat. Through it, he intoned the ritual’s arcane syllables.

Halfway through the recitation, he opened the compact. Within nestled a bed of red crystals. He pinched a crystal no larger than a grain of rice between thumb and forefinger. He raised his gaze to the vault’s ceiling and dropped the grain directly into his right eye.

The crystal dissolved across his perception, sheeting the chamber with a veil of blood. The outlines of the podium, Anusha, and the stand holding the Dreamheart shimmered, as if no longer certain of their boundaries.

He blinked, trying to ignore the anticipation vibrating through his traitorous body. Tendrils of dust reached into his blood and his mind, penetrating to his very soul.

Japheth laughed. Suddenly, everything made sense.

Did gods feel this way? He threw put his arms as if to embrace the world. He wondered, not for the first time, if traveler’s dust was indeed the crystallized blood of some deity killed when magic had failed. Or perhaps the ichor of some fell demon lord. Either way it was glorious—to the Nine with the repercussions!

The walls swam back into focus as the first rush of the dust swept past him. Fortunately, he hadn’t been whirled

onto the crimson road. His eyes found Anusha's resting form.

"Oh!" He'd taken the dust for a reason. Not for this feeling, or at least not merely for this feeling, but also so he could conclude the ritual. He grinned so fiercely his cheeks ached.

The warlock concentrated through the pulsing colors that tried to pull his attention down countless corridors of distraction. "Focus, you idiot," he muttered, and picked up the jade rod*He stepped between Anusha and the Dreamheart, directly over the intersection of the two silver circles on the floor. The smell of the powdered scales bothered him less now that traveler's dust coursed through his veins.

He laid his left palm on Anusha's forehead. Her skin was cold.

Japheth extended his right arm toward the Dreamheart, pushing the jade rod through the relic's cage so that it just brushed the orb's mottled surface.

He uttered the final words of the ritual. A jolt of energy transfixed him between Anusha and the Dreamheart as a connection was made. His body and dust-charged mind were the conduit. He cried out, and purple sparks played across his teeth.

A whirlpool opened its maw beneath the warlock's feet, and a psychic undertow pulled him down into the swirling abyss. He plunged through the flooring, then soil and crushed rock, then a gulf of dark water, and finally hard bedrock. Down. Japheth understood he wasn't really falling and that his body yet stood in the vault of his suite. Despite that, his breath became labored. Great hands seemed to squeeze him tighter and tighter as he descended, as if the world itself sought to smash him between two basalt palms.

His vantage point flashed into open space. He gasped. for breath as the pressure relented. He floated in a cavern large enough to swallow Waterdeep whole. A mountainsized

obelisk filled half the space. The obelisk's base was buried in the vault's floor, and its summit plunged up through the cavern's ceiling. He flashed closer and saw that even the portion not buried in stone was hundreds of feet long. Disquieting striations crawled across the obelisk's visible face. The furrows and curling lines—were they runes of some terrible, primordial language?

Were the lines actually crawling and moving, or was that a hallucination of the dust?

The cyclopean structure sucked him inside.

Gnarled walls streaked past, some dry, others slicked with phosphorescent slime. Japheth saw vast mechanisms whose function escaped his understanding. Chambers pitted with catacomb-like hollows were numerous. Some of the hollows contained pallid lumps of unmoving flesh lying in beds of slime. The thunder of distant waters throbbed in irregular cycles, tickling the back of Japheth's throat.

Then all sense of movement ceased. Japheth hovered before an expanse of mottled glass. His sense of orientation was lost—was the glass a sheet that formed a wall, or the curving face of a much larger sphere?

He ran his fingers across the pitted surface. So cold! It wasn't glass, but ice. And in its frosted depths, figures were entombed...

The shapes were people! All shimmered with translucence, as though not wholly present. The warlock grunted.

He recognized the cues. The figures might very well have been invisible to him if not for his traveler's dust.

Japheth moved down the wall, scanning faces and forms. A gaunt woman with mottled yellow skin and an uplifted nose stared from the ice, her expression frozen in surprise. Farther back, an eyeless fellow with black skin and black hair cringed. A woman with no eyes, except for those on her palms, bent forward as if caught in the act of weeping. And... a mind flayer! But its tentacles were flaccid, and its

terrible orbs did not track Japheth's passage. It was caught, just as all the others were, dreamers whose nightmares had propelled them too far.

He found Anusha.

The girl was only partially frozen. Like a drowning victim, she reached from the ice, her hands seeking some purchase. Her face was a mask of desperation, caught in the moment of her entrapment.

"I'm here!" Japheth lunged for Anusha's hand. His fingers passed through her palm and plunged into the ice face.

He and she were both mental phantoms, of course, of different origins and abilities, but neither was real.

Perhaps it would be more difficult than just grabbing and pulling.

Then he discovered his own hand was now stuck in the ice slab. "Oh, for the love of Bane!" he swore. Worry clutched at him, even through his dust-given serenity.

It took all his discipline not to brace himself against the slab with his other hand.

Whether ice or a stranger substance, the slab was acting as some sort of dream catcher. And Japheth's presence was something like a dream.

He had a sudden image of inn staff finding him slumped over Anusha's inert form, both she and he forever insensate, their minds trapped together in that nightmare tomb. Not the romantic reunion he'd hoped for.

That sad image reminded him his physical body was still engaged in a ritual, however far away. The jade rod, in particular, was so costly specifically because of its insulating qualities. His mind should be safe as long as the ritual continued and he didn't lose his grasp on the rod.

Japheth concentrated on ignoring the frigid pain in his phantom hand. Instead, he imagined himself back in the vault of his suite, one hand on Anusha's forehead, the other gripping the jade rod whose tip lightly grazed the Dreamheart.

The image of his room in the Lorious refused to solidify. The dream-catching ice failed to release him from its cold embrace.

He persisted, attempting to fix every detail of his suite at the inn into his mind's eye. Faintly at first, then more strongly, he heard a dog barking.

He suddenly perceived two realities, one superimposed over the other. In the fainter scene, he was indeed still locked in the ritual. A black dog had jumped up so its paws rested on his chest. It was Lucky, barking and wagging his tail furiously.

"Good boy," Japheth said, his voice a whisper.

He couldn't feel his body in the Lorious image, even though it was his true self. He was numb. He tried to release his grip on the jade rod. Nothing.

"By the Twin Princes!" he swore. He tried again, imagining his arm holding the rod and his vision arm in the ice as one and the same. This time, his real arm and his vision arm moved in synchrony.

The rod's tip snapped off with a crack of purple lightning. Jade shards whistled through the vault.

The ghostly image of his chambers at the inn solidified even as his perception of the ice slab and the entombed dreamers washed away. Before it completely faded, Japheth grabbed again for Anusha's outstretched arm. This time, his palm slapped into hers. He grasped her hand and pulled for all he was worth.

The collapsing ritual yanked him away from the ice face, and so he pulled Anusha in turn. An explosive crack splintered across the freezing expanse, and she was free.

He blinked.

Smoke hazed the vault, and Lucky ran around the chamber in glad circles. He stepped to the travel chest and rested his hands on the side. "Are you there?"

Anusha's dark eyes opened. She stared uncomprehendingly up at him. "What... ? I dreamed I was

far away..."

Moisture welled in Japheth's eyes. "You're back, Anusha. That's the only thing that matters. You're back."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Veltalar, Aglarond

She was so cold. Desolate winds whispered around her, jealous of the tiny spark of heat she retained. Yet a moment earlier, she'd been colder still, a horrified scream frozen in ice.

Her eyes flipped open. Light stung them, but the illumination was sweet despite the pain. It had been too long since she'd seen anything but chill darkness.

A shape moved in the light. A man she'd known once.

She said, "What... ? I dreamed I was far away..

The man bent down. He wore a cloak black as coal, an ominous counterpoint to his concerned expression. He said, "You're back, Anusha. That's the only thing that matters. You're back."

"Japheth?" she asked.

The warlock nodded and took her hand. His palm was warm. His eyes were watery... and red with a recent dose of traveler's dust. He said, "I'm here. And so are you!"

She sat up. Fragments of what had happened since she followed him through the streets of New Sarshel began to assemble.

A black dog jumped up and rested its paws on the opposite side of the travel chest. It stretched out its head, trying to lick her face. She remembered the mutt and smiled, turning her head from Lucky's joyful attentions.

Anusha's gaze wandered, but her attention focused inward as her memory wove itself from past to present.

She'd been dreamwalking in a dark place half drowned in seawater, beneath an island. A tentacled monster had attacked her with a relic like a disembodied eye—an eye whose gaze caught her. She'd tried to flee, to return to the safety of her physical body...

But something had prevented her.

Her gaze snapped back to Japheth. "Your elixir of sleep trapped me in dream form. I couldn't get away. It almost caught me because of you!"

The man's eyes widened and his grip slackened. He nodded and said, "I am so sorry, Anusha. I never meant—"

Heat blossomed in her chest, dispelling the chill. It was the same feeling she felt when she thought of her half brother, Behroun. Spiteful words danced in her throat, eager for escape. "These drugs of yours... you're on the dust right now—I can tell by your eyes! What is it with you?"

The warlock looked away.

She wondered how she could be attracted to him. How could she even think of him like that when he was a drugaddled, Hells-bound scoundrel? A roguishly handsome, sweet, and determined scoundrel, but a scoundrel all the same. Was she the stupidest woman in all Toril? Anyone with any sense would flee and never think of him again. She would do just that...

Which would be easier if the mere sight of him didn't make her heart expand.

Japheth said, "You're right, Anusha. The dust's in me right now. But I had no recourse. You didn't get away. It caught you."

"What do you mean?" He looked back at her, swallowed. "I mean that godsdamned relic sucked your mind into its heart and pulled you down to a city of torment. I've been trying to rescue you for tendays. I needed a pinch of traveler's dust to find and see your dream form. You were one of hundreds caught. It was... the only way I knew to save you."

The heat in her chest cooled but did not burn out. She asked, "If I could have woken up, you wouldn't have had to spend tendays trying to rescue me!"

Then the full import of his words breached her anger. “Wait. You mean I’ve been... sleeping? For tendays? And you couldn’t wake me up, even when the elixir you gave me ran its course?”

Her skin prickled. Memory crashed upon her—an ice cocoon stifling her body and psyche, a void of motionless thought speckled with dreamers trapped like flies in a web. She gasped in dawning revulsion.

“Your mind was ensnared,” Japheth said. “But I pulled you free.”

The frozen image seemed to solidify around Anusha. Lassitude crawled down her limbs, tying them with strands of returning sleep. She said, “Did you? I don’t think so...”

The Dreamheart’s eye stared straight into her soul. Anusha heard Luckyk frantic barks as if from the bottom of a well, then nothing.

Anusha saw a woman standing in a place shrouded by mist and slicked with luminescent slime. Pillars whose size she couldn’t begin to guess faded off into the fogged distance.

The woman was familiar. It took her a moment to recognize herself.

She realized she was dreaming. It was odd to see herself at such a remove, though dreams were often strange like that.

Her image seemed distraught. It beckoned and spoke, but not the least sound emerged. Was she mute? Anusha strained but heard nothing. She tried to sound out the words her lips made. Something about a... Key of Stars?

And a Citadel. Plus something else she couldn’t quite decipher.

Horror closed over her head as if she were being pulled beneath a pool of ice water. She tried to scream, to move, to warn the image. But no feeling of flailing limbs, or even

breath in her chest, rewarded her effort. She was like a bug under glass, slowly smothering.

Searing pain shattered the dream into jagged shards that exploded outward.

Anusha lurched and fell forward. Several small, hard objects clattered on her back. Silence followed. She coughed.

Cold shards dug into her cheek and prone body. She lay facedown in a scatter of... broken glass? No, too cold.

The shards were chips of ice. She levered herself up and stood.

A rough wall of ice, like a glacier's face, stretched away left, right, and up many tens of feet. It shed wan, bluish light. Even standing only a couple of paces from it, she saw a subtle receding curve to the chill face, as if instead of a wall, the ice were a massive dome. Or perhaps a sphere set in the dark stone floor. Murky blots lay just below the surface, oddly symmetrical.

A rough crater marred the ice in front of her. Anusha reached for the edges of the pit, but paused before her finger touched. The cavity, while broken and jagged, traced a humanoid outline. Something had broken free of the ice.

Had it been her? Probably yes. She shuddered.

A memory jolted her. Anusha recalled Japheth's relieved face, telling her he'd rescued her.

"Some rescue!" she exclaimed, remembering the coiling force that snatched her back down into unconsciousness.

She clenched her fists, hoping to feel a renewed surge of anger, enough to banish the first unwelcome hints of fear. Japheth's mysterious patron and unfathomable powers, his quests and his potions—they all added up to her being here, wherever here was.

But her anger seemed spent. If she was fully honest with herself, it was her initial act of stowing away on Green Siren that set her course and finally landed her here.

And Japheth's ritual had accomplished something good, she mused. He'd pried her loose from the wintry sphere, even if he'd ultimately failed to merge her dream with her sleeping body.

Hold on. Was she in her dream form? Anusha studied her hand. It looked and felt normal. She imagined she wore a glove. A gauntlet of golden, articulated metal shimmered and enclosed her hand.

Yes, she was dreaming. She tried to wake up.

A flicker of blackness, and then... nothing changed. The great globe of ice remained obstinately front and center. She tried again, failed again. Then again. Another failure. She was locked out of her body! And this time it wasn't because of the elixir of sleep.

Hints of the smothering dream she'd just escaped enclosed her.

Where was she? Anxiety made her thoughts come fast.

Japheth said something about her being pulled down to a city of... terror? Torment? She couldn't remember.

Was she in the place she'd imagined, where her image tried to talk but no words emerged? She didn't see any mist or columns.

Fear seeped in beneath her reason and pawed at her self-control.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered, her eyes darting away from the ice into the wider darkness that enclosed it. Awful scenarios twirled her around in a full circle. Dire prospects half solidified like a spider's web.

Every possibility ended in her grisly death.

Her mind was trapped outside her body in a place that would shame most nightmares. Japheth had tried to free her, but failed. She would die here. The only question was whether she would fail slowly over time or suddenly when some soul-eating creature caught sight of her.

She could hardly breathe.

The thought was like the sun rising on a dreary plain. She was in her dream form. Breathing was an illusion!

She was formless—and invisible to most things.

Anusha's panic fell off, becoming a more manageable ache of worry. Fear she could handle. Panic would propel her to a quick end, she'd heard enough stories to know giving in to arm-flailing terror rarely worked out—

The sound of something cracking drew a shrill yelp from her.

Her eyes fastened on the great dome. It was riddled with shadows beneath the surface. Not air pockets... She realized the symmetrical shadows were the outlines of people! People trapped in the ice, as she had been.

She walked in measured paces along the frozen boundary, controlling her phantom breathing. Anusha gazed into the blurred surface. All were preserved motionless, as if dead. It was probably how she'd looked.

There were so many! She saw a short woman—a dwarf, a human man in lavender robes, a creature whose lower face had tentacles hanging off it, another woman, either a comely human or an eladrin—her loose hair hid the most telltale feature. And there was a fellow whose hair was composed of glowing crystal—

Another crack. It was from back the other way. She hurried around the periphery until she returned to the crater where she had emerged. One of its rough edges had spawned a fissure nearly two feet wide that zigzagged across the crystalline face for several feet.

Even as she watched, another retort like glass breaking issued from the crevice. A body slipped from the fissure and dropped to the floor only a pace from Anusha.

"By Imbrar!" she gasped.

The figure moaned. It was a woman! But not human—her skin was the color of desert sand with darker mottling. Her hair was brown and long, layered into braids. Her features were sharp and her ears were as elongated as an elf's. But

the woman's severe features and coloration, and her silvery plate armor, didn't seem particularly fey.

The woman shivered. She stared at the icy tomb from which she'd emerged, and croaked several rough syllables. Whether ritual or language, the sounds were crude and slippery and assaulted Anusha's ears. She retreated a step.

The woman broke off her litany and turned to regard Anusha. Though she continued to shake with cold, the woman's filmy translucency argued she was as immaterial as Anusha.

"Who are you?" Anusha ventured.

The woman's face seemed expressionless. She said in oddly accented Common, "I am... Yeva. I am dreaming."

"You're not dreaming," Anusha said without thinking.

The woman nodded and bent her head into her hands. Silent sobs shook her shoulders. Tears trickled between her fingers. Her form began to waver and thin like fog before the rising sun.

"Hey!" Anusha exclaimed and dashed forward. She touched the woman's shoulder, but her form continued to unravel and fade. "Don't leave me alone here!" Anusha said. She hugged the woman, trying to hold her fraying presence together.

The woman's body was filmy strands of gauze in her arms.

"Stay!" Anusha pleaded, wishing the woman's presence to endure just as she willed her own shape and clothing.

Yeva's body gradually came back into focus. It returned to being only slightly translucent to Anusha's eyes and solid and warm to her touch.

The yellow-skinned woman drew in a deep breath. She looked into Anusha's eyes and whispered, "You have power here? Who are you who can command the captured dreams of Xxiphu?"

Anusha released the embrace. The woman's form remained constant. "I am Anusha Marhana. I'm no one, really."

“You are a human, of Faerûn, if I’m not mistaken. A great sorceress you must be, though I admit I am not familiar with your name, and I made some study of such things before I was trapped. I wonder how long...”

Lines of worry creased her face.

Anusha shook her head. “I’m no sorceress. I just got caught up in events I didn’t understand. I don’t even know where I am, really. But I do have some control over my own dreams...”

“And the dreams of others, it is clear,” Yeva said, her voice louder and more assured. “Your touch anchored me.

I was shriveling, dispersing. If you hadn’t intervened, my soul would have become gruel for the Eldest.” The woman shuddered.

“The Eldest?”

The woman gestured to the expanse of cold white. She pronounced in her lilting accent, “The Eldest broods over this city. It is an entity whose age surpasses most gods.”

“And this... Eldest, it eats souls?”

Yeva nodded. “The Eldest sleeps. Its mind moves so slowly its thoughts hardened millennia ago. The chambers where the creature’s attention flowed through Xxiphu in ancient days are choked with its petrified thoughts.

People whose dreams veer too near are caught here forever while their bodies waste until they perish. As likely happened to my body centuries ago..*The strangely hued woman cast down her eyes.

Anusha didn’t have a ready reply. If what Yeva said was true, that her body was dead even though her dream remained—did that make her a ghost?

Ghost or not, Anusha wondered about Yeva’s strange coloration and features. The woman was a member of no race she’d ever seen or even heard about.

She decided not to pursue either question. Instead, she asked, “Xxiphu—what is that? Is it where we stand?”

The woman gave a curt nod. "Xxiphu is a city of primeval aboleths. So I have learned, to my despair. I did not seek it, but those I hunted tricked me and lured me here. Where my mind was caught." The woman's fists clenched. "And now I am nothing but a figment." Her eyes slicked with a new surge of moisture.

"More than a figment, unless I'm imagining you," Anusha said, smiling.

The woman studied Anusha and said, "Perhaps you do but imagine me. If you hadn't reinforced me somehow, I'd be gone. I felt my mind slipping away, dissolving."

"You said that before. How can you be sure?"

Yeva tilted her head. "I have abilities too, Anusha. Potent ones, if not suited to my present predicament. I sense a burning power in you, despite your lack of physical form. You are not a memory like me. More like a... construct of psionic power. A thread of your will keeps me here."

Anusha shook her head, not really understanding the woman. "You have abilities? What sort? Can they help us to escape this place? My body lies on the surface."

The woman looked out into the surrounding darkness, toward the ice face, then back at Anusha. She considered for a long while, saying nothing. Finally, she shrugged. "Even though reason suggests our attempts shall fail, we should try. I am not the sort who gives up my quest while reasonable hope remains. I don't know what my fate will be if we do win free. Nor do I know how many years have passed since I was trapped. But I'll never know if I do nothing."

"Can your abilities help us escape?" Anusha asked again.

Yeva produced a short bark of laughter. "My talents would be useful should any creature threaten our insubstantial selves. I suppose in this terrible place there might be such creatures. Aboleths can blast the minds of their foes or enslave them." Anusha didn't like the sound of that. She'd been hurt while dreamwalking once before.

Yeva continued, "Let us explore. Perhaps the inhabitants of this city hibernate like their lord, the Eldest. We shall search for a door and try to exit. Unless things are changed, we are deep in the earth, in the bottommost cellars and roots of the Underdark. Perhaps some tunnels to higher caverns can be found."

Anusha said, "Yes, let's try! Though I hope if I walk too far, I won't be pulled back here."

"Pulled back here? Is there some reason to believe you might be?"

"No, I... well, yes. There is that concern. My dream form used to be bound to my body. I could only move so far from it before I was pulled back into wakefulness. Now, my body is far away, much farther than my old limit.

When I try to wake up, I flicker and remain in this chamber of ice..."

"So?"

"So, I might have a new focus. Maybe this very sphere of ice."

Yeva said, "For your sake, I hope you're wrong. Otherwise, you will probably never escape. Then it will only be a matter of time before you go insane, or the Eldest's condensed and frozen thoughts reabsorb you."

"Oh."

Yeva gave a grim chuckle and gestured into the darkness. "This way?"

"Sure."

CHAPTER SIX

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Veltalar, Aglarond

Seagulls hung on invisible thermals over the alley. Their beaks jerked left and right as they scanned every foot of the squalid space for scraps. Bird cries echoed off the clapboards. Broken furnishings, heaped garbage, and less identifiable waste crowded the narrow lane. The stink was overpowering.

Raidon guessed the odor was composed of rotting fish, dead rats, and—overwhelmingly—urine.

The smell threatened to ruin his concentration. His Sign had drawn him to Veltalar, but now it was giving him problems.

A breeze managed to squeeze between the buildings to ruffle his hair, easing the rank smell. He breathed in more deeply while the opportunity presented itself. The old storehouses were too far from the new port to enjoy a consistent sea breeze.

“Still nothing?” thoster asked from behind Raidon.

Raidon glanced back. The captain and Seren walked single file after the monk, trusting him to lead them to their quarry.

Raidon said, “Nothing. I’ll let you know if that changes. No need to keep inquiring.”

Seren chuckled. Thoster nodded, then mopped his brow.

The Cerulean Sign’s direction had dispersed as they’d drawn near the Aglarondan port. The Dreamheart was in the city, that was clear, but the relic’s power was too overwhelming this close. The Sign was too inundated with the Dreamheart’s aberrant influence to get a precise fix.

“Well, how about your directions—sure you ain’t lost?” Thoster asked. “I doubt Japheth’s holed up out here. It’s a sty.”

“The man I spoke with last night—”

Seren interrupted, “He was a thief. He tried to steal my wand! I wish you’d let me deal with him.”

Raidon said, “My hard-won contact, who we should not disable until we’re certain we no longer require his services, said a man in a dark cape took control of a gang of thieves tough enough to intimidate the locals. The man’s description matches Japheth.”

“What was the gang called again?” asked Thoster. The captain watched the gulls overhead.

“The Razorhides.”

Seren said, “I have no doubt it’s Japheth. The warlock was moody, dependent on traveler’s dust, and beholden to Behroun Marhana. Just the sort who’d take up with a band of ragtag thieves.”

“And he’s had the Dreamheart for tendays,” said Raidon. “Who knows how much it’s further corrupted him? If providence favors us, the newest Razorhide will prove to be our quarry.”

“Well, let’s be on with it,” groused Thoster, still watching the antics of the birds. “I ain’t broke last night’s fast yet, you rushed us off the ship so early.”

The trio came to a place where the alley widened. A kid lounged on a terrace above, watching the same gulls as the pirate captain. The dirt-smeared sentry was no more than ten or twelve years old, Raidon judged. A small part of him suspected he should feel sad to see the lot life had handed the child. The monk raised his hand, a signal for Thoster and Seren to pause. The kid glanced down and saw Raidon in the alley mouth.

“Well met,” Raidon ventured, his voice pitched low, but loud enough for the child to hear. “I have a potentially valuable proposition for you. Do you know someone called —”

The boy’s shrill whistle echoed down the alley. He ducked off the balcony through a doorway behind him.

“You handled that well,” said Thoster.

Raidon shrugged and said, “Follow me.” He charged the scarred wooden door below the balcony. The area in front of it was conspicuously free of garbage. Raidon transferred the momentum of his dash into a simple front kick. His heel smashed the reinforced door from its iron hinges.

Yells of surprise and alarm issued from somewhere inside. The monk ducked into the opening. He stood in a halllike vestibule that smelled of damp, soot, and salt. Another set of doors blocked the way, but these were guarded.

Vaguely humanoid, the guardian seemed to be an animated accumulation of dockside debris—tattered sails, fish teeth, matted seaweed, gull feathers, and dirt. It wore a crown of smashed shells and a cloak of sea mist. Its eyes were smoothed stones, and its hands were rusted nails from shipwrecks.

The creature didn’t move. It intoned, “Leave, intruder, or see your organs pulled from your flesh moments before Kelemvor claims your wailing spirit.” The voice seemed familiar...

Seren called from behind, “That sounds like Japheth!” The woman peeked into the vestibule, her wand drawn.

Thoster stood next to her, his whirring, clicking sword unsheathed.

“Warlock, you hiding in there?” said the captain.

Raidon advanced another step.

The doors behind the creature opened. Several grim young faces peered out. Mostly humans, male and female, only a few older than twenty. The tallest said, “You’re dead meat.”

Captain Thoster guffawed. “The three of us faced down a great kraken less than a month ago, lad. I don’t reckon we’ll have trouble turning you lot into so much chum for the sharks.”

Raidon raised his hand. “We only want to know one thing—where is the warlock Japheth?”

The tallest youth scowled. He was a little older than the rest, and his arms were bare, apparently to show off an elaborate stitchery of scars and tattoos.

A younger, pudgier kid behind the tall one blurted, "He's the man! What d'you want with Japheth?"

"Is he here now?" purred Seren. She moved into the vestibule. "We'd like to talk to him."

"Nah," continued the pudgy kid. "He don't hardly ever come here. We bring him his tribute at the—"

The scarred youth backhanded the talkative kid across the face. He hissed, "Sheathe it or I'll rip out your entrails, eh?"

The pudgy kid yelped, "Sorry, Dherk!"

The youth, apparently named Dherk, addressed his guests again. "Japheth didn't mention friends. So get lost."

"I'm sure he'll want to talk to us," said Seren, her voice silky.

"Lady, I'll talk to you right now," the scarred fellow leered.

Then his smile faded. He said, "I have a question—how did you find our den? Too many loose lips, I think."

As he finished his almost thoughtful statement, Dherk flipped his right hand up from where it hung at his side.

He released a small knife that hadn't been there a moment earlier.

The knife buried itself in Seren's throat. Her eyes went wide. Blood welled around a protruding blade smeared with green paste. A cry of excitement went up among the gang members as the wizard staggered backward, one hand clutching at the knife hilt.

Raidon charged. He aimed a flying knee at the treacherous youth.

Just before his knee connected with Dherk's head, one of the constructs nail hands clawed Raidon out of the air.

The monk was hammered to the ground. Three of the scarecrow's nails remained behind, two in Raidon's coat

and one in his arm, all three punched through to the wooden floor. The monk was nailed to the ground.

He yelled, "Ware the construct's hands!" as he tried to pull free.

Thoster said, "Quit playing around, Raidon!"

The monk tensed, jerked, and pulled his arm free of the nail. Blood poured down his arm as he rose. He ducked beneath another claw. The thing wasn't actually that fast—it had caught Raidon off guard. Seren got a grip on the knife hilt and pulled the blade free. More blood flowed. It was stained green from the paste. She gurgled, "Poisoned!" She let the dagger fall.

Thoster twisted his sword's hilt. A vial dropped from a previously hidden hollow. He palmed it and pressed it into Seren's bloody hand. "Drink it, eh? A restorative. And an anti-venom!"

Seren uncorked the vial with her teeth and gagged down its contents.

Raidon swayed like a tree in the wind to avoid another heavy but slow swipe by the construct.

Dherk tried to flank the monk, another knife held high. He brought it down in a brutal blow as if wielding an ice pick.

Raidon deflected the knife with his left forearm. His right hand balled into a fist and lashed straight into Dherk's throat. The youth made an odd noise and dropped the knife.

Raidon followed up by snatching the lapels of the youth's sleeveless coat. Still holding Dherk, he twisted his upper torso. The youth's feet left the ground as he was swung around the monk's body, propelled by the force of the throw until he sprawled at Thoster's feet.

The captain put the point of his sword in the hollow of the gang leader's tattooed throat. He said, "Call off your construct," levity gone from his voice.

Dherk gasped, yelled, "I can't! Japheth, that sheepstraddler, set it in motion!"

The seashell-crowned bulk heaved toward Thoster and Seren but avoided stamping on the bleeding tough at its feet.

"I've had enough of this," hissed Seren, her voice hoarse but furious.

The wizard brandished her wand and whispered three syllables like a cold wind blowing through the eaves. A wintry line momentarily connected the wand tip with the advancing driftwood scarecrow. Ice blossomed around it until the constructs body was trapped in a frozen sarcophagus. It ceased moving.

The faces watching the fight through the inner doorway had lost their grins. One by one, they faded into the shadows.

"Lost your nerve, eh?" Thoster yelled after them. He glanced back down at Dherk, who he still threatened with his sword. "Your gang ain't up to defending its turf."

Dherk snarled, "We're a little tired of mages appearing out o' nowhere and blasting us to the Hells and back for a lark!"

Raidon motioned for Thoster to sheathe his sword. He crouched next to the angry young man. "Tell us where to find Japheth, and we'll trouble you no more."

"Why're you so antsy to find him?"

"He stole something from us. We want it back."

Dherk's eyes narrowed. He studied Raidon, his clothing, and the still-sheathed shape of the sword riding the monk's back. He said, "He's stolen something from us too! All the work we do, day and night—he's taking most of it!"

Seren slipped her wand back into her belt. The vial Thoster had dispensed had nearly smoothed away the gash in her neck, though dried blood remained and her hair was uncharacteristically disheveled. She fixed the gang leader with a hard stare and said, "The warlock is skimming your coin?"

“Yeah!” said Dherk. He sat up. “He said he needed it to bankroll something he was working on. He also wanted us to score traveler’s dust. I don’t really care what he’s doing — all I know is he’s taking what belongs to us! So yeah, I’ll tell you where to find Japheth. If you promise he’ll trouble the Razorhides no more.”

“You ain’t in a position to demand things, lad!” Thoster said.

Raidon helped Dherk to stand and said, “Take us to Japheth. When we get back what the warlock stole from us, we’ll see about what ‘belongs’ to you.”

Dherk smirked. “Now you’re talking.”

Tendrils of arcane formulas twined up the vault wall. Sigils, runes, and sympathetic congruencies combined to create an elaborate diagram. Alphabets jumbled together, so that the graceful swoops of Rellanic battled the crude lines of Davek while intertwining uncomfortably with the even more elaborate loops of Supernal. Where lines intersected, glimmers of light gathered.

Japheth traced the inmost lines for the hundredth time to the diagram’s center, where a magical sum was scribed in chalk. It was a conclusion that, no matter how many ways he varied the formulas, refused to change. He turned, swaying with exhaustion. His eyes fell on Anusha’s sleeping form. “You were right. I didn’t save you at all.”

Lucky raised his head from his paws. Japheth rubbed at his forehead, smudging it with chalk. “It’s impossible.”

The dog whined.

The warlock dropped the chalk. He called the dog over and ruffled him behind the ears. “Don’t worry, I’m not giving up. But...” He shook his head. “But I’ll have to take a trip. No way around it. Anusha’s mind is fixed to a new focus. Breaking the Dreamheart won’t bring her back—it would sever my last hope for finding her.”

He shook his head. "If I fail..." Despite how he liked to think he was a hard man living in hard times, he knew he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he was unable to save Anusha.

Lucky wagged his tail, not really comprehending. He was happy to see Japheth moving again after hours of intense scribbling and muttering.

The sound of something breaking jerked both their heads around. A puff of cold vapor rose from the birchwood podium next to Anusha's bier. Japheth examined the clutter of arcane implements piled there. His eyes dropped to the hemp cord that dangled off the podium's side.

The nautilus seashell lay broken on the floor, its whorled shards frosted with ice. It was the amulet keyed to the construct he'd left in the Razorhides' den.

"The construct is defunct," he mused, "destroyed by winter magic. I wonder how Dherk managed..."

He frowned. Japheth placed a finger on the largest remaining piece and closed his eyes. The connection was already dissipating. He concentrated, forcing the bond to remain active another few heartbeats. For his effort he received a stabbing headache and the image of Raidon Kane.

"Mystra's corpse, they've found me!" he gasped.

How long since the driftwood scarecrow was destroyed? Mere moments? Given the inexperienced way he'd crafted the thing, that might be a fool's hope. The amulet's destruction could be relaying old news.

The disturbing plan he'd half conceived as his final recourse had become, with one look into Raidon's determined gaze, his only option.

He contemplated simply waiting for Raidon. He could try to patch up the misunderstanding and explain his need.

But the half-elf and his relic-sundering sword might not listen to reason. He might demand the Dreamheart. Of course Japheth wouldn't give it up. He'd already risked

everything to free Anusha. He'd invested too much to gamble losing her.

"I will go to Xxiphu," he whispered, incredulous. He'd travel to that horrid place where her mind's new focus lay and cut her spirit free.

The only question remaining was how.

A long step through his cloak might get him to the place where he'd seen Anusha's soul caught up. To do so, he would have to touch the Dreamheart again and draw upon its energy to extend the range of his step. It might be possible.

First he needed allies. Working by himself was proving too limiting. A trip down to Xxiphu without backup would probably see him dead not long afterward, with Anusha no better off than before.

Japheth cast about, wondering who could help him. A name popped into his head, he already knew someone who possessed the knowledge and resources to help.

It was unfortunate that person hated Japheth so fiercely he'd sworn multiple oaths to see the warlock dead. But with Japheth's pursuers nipping at his heels, the Lord of Bats would have to serve.

Fear lent his tired limbs new swiftness. He found a canvas satchel and swept all the items on the podium into it.

He rushed from the vault into the adjoining suite and began snatching up tomes. There were a few treatises and ritual books he'd need, especially if Neifion didn't prove amenable to Japheth's charm.

Lucky, mistaking his frantic motion for play, barked and leaped in the warlock's path. "Not now, boy!" Japheth said.

He pushed one last tome into the satchel, then popped the whole thing into his cloak. Several books rich with precious lore remained scattered among the printed dross in his suite, but he didn't have time to weigh their merits against the ones already in his bag.

He returned to Anusha's side. He gazed at her serene, pale face. "Raidon's on his way. He means to destroy the Dreamheart. By the Nine, I wish I had more time!" He brushed a stray strand of hair from Anusha's forehead. "So we must travel again. To Darroch Castle. Don't worry. I'll keep you—"

The crack of splintering timber resounded through the vault. A flash of cerulean light glinted on the door frame.

Something had breached his outer suite.

He whirled, his stomach clenching. He hadn't finished his preparations.

"Japheth!" a hard voice called. "Give up the relic!"

The warlock lunged for the Dreamheart at the head of Anusha's travel chest. In his haste, he fumbled the cage and knocked it to the floor.

Raidon Kane appeared in the vault entrance. The halfelf moved with a relaxed grace that conveyed unswerving menace. Angul was in his hands. It burned with blue fire, as did the tattoo on Raidon's chest.

Lucky growled. Despite everything, concern troubled the warlock for the dog's welfare.

"Lucky! Get away!" Japheth ordered. He loosed a crackling line of eldritch fire from a finger, missed the halfelf, then ducked below the top of the travel chest, which lay between him and the door. The relic lay some five feet from him. It was completely undefended, vulnerable to a single stroke of the monk's sword—

Raidon came around the other side of the travel chest and saw the relic at his feet. The monk was impossibly fast! His sword swept high, preparing for a sundering stroke. Angul's flame was bright as the sun, if the sun burned blue.

"No!" croaked Japheth. He tried to get off another spell, one that would knock the monk away from his target, but he was too slow—

The Dreamheart's eye shuttered open and fixed the monk with its ageless glare.

Raidon hesitated.

Japheth finished his incantation. A golden glow snatched the half-elf and transferred him as far as Japheth could manage with so little time to prepare—out into the suite, perhaps even into the hallway beyond.

A cry of surprise from two throats issued from the next room, one a man's, the other a woman's. Thoster and...

Seren? It didn't matter. They would have to deal with a disoriented monk, perhaps murderously so, giving Japheth precious moments to flee.

He stooped and grabbed the Dreamheart. Its cage was broken. He shook the orb loose of its shattered fetters.

The stone was clammy and cold, slightly slippery. He cringed from the touch, but its coolness faded almost instantly. Heat woke along its irregular sides, a warmth that tingled. It was... pleasant. And terrifying.

Just as when he'd fled Gethshemeth's sea cave, he instinctively sucked energy from the stone and channeled it into his cloak. That time, he'd stepped first from the cavern to the seamount's surface to gather Anusha, the chest, and Lucky. From there he'd stepped across the world, east over the Sea of Fallen Stars.

Now he needed to go even farther, and in a direction that didn't exist in the world.

Normally he had to leave his cloak behind as a bridge if he wished to access the Lord of Bats's home. He didn't have that luxury at the moment—his enemies would simply follow him to his sanctuary.

The Dreamheart warmed further, becoming like a live thing shuddering in his grip. It gave him what he asked for, enough strength to use his cloak as a door to another plane.

Raidon cradled the relic in the crook of one elbow, then bent to gather up Anusha. Before he managed her weight, Raidon reappeared in the vault's doorway, with Captain Thoster only a step behind.

It almost looked like the captain was reaching out, trying to restrain Raidon. But the monk leaped, too fast for the captain. He was a streak in the air whose leading point was a flying knee, rigid like a ship's prow. The monk held Angul straight over his head so that the blade's flame streaked the air with cerulean fire.

The half-elf's brutal knee caught the warlock in the chest. Pain splintered Japheth's awareness and tore Anusha from his grip.

He tried to mouth a curse, but the blow emptied his lungs of air. The savage force tumbled Japheth and the Dreamheart into the waiting void of his gaping cloak. He fell headlong through a one-way portal to a place beyond the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Veltalar, Aglarond

Raidon cracked his knuckles, one after the other. Angul was plunged point first into the vault floor, simmering. He stared at empty air where the warlock had escaped into a collapsing portal mouth formed of his own shadowed cape. Holding the Dreamheart. He stared as if wishing alone could bore that portal open anew.

"He's slippery like a fish off the hook," said Captain Thoster. The pirate stood looking down at the girl Anusha, one hand scratching his chin as he considered the sleeper. "Japheth'd give up his mind to the relic for this one, eh? She doesn't look like anything special. He called her Anusha in the grotto."

Seren, standing in the vault doorway, said, "He was hiding her aboard the ship all along. How macabre."

A low growl sprang up. A dog, large and black, advanced on the captain from the vault's corner.

"Blackie!" exclaimed Thoster, his eyes lighting with recognition. "What're you doing here? I thought the crew threw you overboard!" The pirate approached the growling beast, his hands proffered for the dog to sniff.

"Your hound is a poor guard—it took up with the ghost girl here quick enough," Seren said. "Dispatch the disloyal cur."

The captain shook his head, laughing at the mercenary wizard's suggestion. "I think I might have a treat, Blackie," he crooned to the dog, one hand searching through his voluminous pockets.

Raidon watched without really seeing, as canine and man were reacquainted. His thoughts were elsewhere.

Once again, the aberrant relic had avoided destruction through the warlock's interference. The object had

obviously corrupted the man as it had corrupted Nogah.

It was Raidon's own fault. The Dreamheart had lain before him, fully vulnerable. The Blade Cerulean was poised, vibrating unswerving conviction through its hilt into Raidon's soul. Why had he hesitated?

Because the Dreamheart looked at him. In that look a momentary connection formed, and Raidon saw through the eye. As the golem of Stardeep had warned him, he saw down into the mantle below the world and glimpsed awakening Xxiphu. Beslimed creatures, sluggish yet with eons of sleep heavy on their tentacles, swam through drowned crannies and crept along purple-lit tunnels leaving trails of mucus. Malevolent and vile, they converged on a cavity high in the city's crown painted with glyphs in colors Raidon's eye couldn't resolve. The creatures... the aboleths, Cynosure called them, gathered in that arcane cavity. They were performing a ghastly ritual.

And over all, a great bulk frozen in stone was stirring.

The Dreamheart's foul vision dazed Raidon long enough for the warlock to make good his treacherous escape.

"You don't look well," came Captain Thoster's voice. "But not half as upset as Japheth looked when you knocked him into the dark, eh?"

Raidon opened his eyes and turned to regard Thoster, but he did not speak.

Seren scowled and said, "Is there anything you don't find funny, Captain?"

The captain sighed. "Oh, come. Yes, our ship is holed and we're taking water, I know. But we ain't dead, are we? We got something from all this running around." He pointed to Anusha. "If Japheth cares so much for this lass, then we got ourselves a fair bargaining chip. He kept hold of the Dreamheart for her. He'll give it up if we threaten to rough her up."

"Hmm," Seren replied, nodding slowly.

"No," Raidon murmured, tired at the mere thought of the captain's banal suggestion. "Anyway, it's too late." He stood, avoiding using Angul's hilt to pull himself upright. "Things have gone too far."

"What's that mean?" asked Thoster, who was feeding another dried piece of fish to the dog.

"Japheth, the great kraken Gethshemeth, and Nogah before them handled the Dreamheart too much. I told you it was but a piece of something terrifyingly larger. A.. creature."

Thoster shrugged. "So?"

"So this monstrosity, this... Eldest aboleth, is already partly roused. Its children, less potent but also less sleepy, are coming awake within the bowels of Xxiphu. Even now, those already awake perform foul rituals to fully animate their stony father. If the aboleths succeed, you can say farewell to Faerun as you know it."

The conviction in his voice shocked even Thoster to silence.

"All hope's lost? Even if we get the Dreamheart now?" asked Seren.

"A threshold has been passed. What I saw in the eye when its gaze locked with mine..." Raidon shook his head.

"The ritual has already begun. To disrupt it, we'd have to go straight to the source. In Xxiphu, if I plunge Angul into the heart of the entity to which the Dreamheart belongs, that might finally slay it."

"Might?" asked Seren. Raidon didn't answer. Instead, he said, "So forget Japheth. His part in this is done. We need to figure out how to reach Xxiphu, and soon."

Hazy layers of smoke squeezed tears from Raidon's eyes. The clink of tallglasses, the shouts of patrons, and the clack of magically animate devices in the room across the hall were maddeningly loud. The sword sheathed on his back tugged this way and that, distracting the monk further.

But Thoster wouldn't talk options until they retired to the Lorious's frantic saloon. The captain's eyes twinkled as he watched well-heeled Veltalarans indulge in ales, wines, pipes, and lit bundles of rolled leaves. Thoster's hat perched high on his head. The man obviously enjoyed the attention of his ostentatious dress at least as much as he enjoyed keeping an eye on a few of the staff who flirted shamelessly with him. The captain seemed unfazed by the idea of seeking Xxiphu. Which was suspicious. Raidon just didn't have the mental energy to decipher Thoster's game right then.

Seren completed their triangle, but her head was buried in a tome she'd liberated from Japheth's suite. Her dark hair hung down just above the yellowed pages, hiding her eyes and face. The wizard ignored the babble of the saloon well enough to read, or at least gave a credible semblance of doing so.

Raidon watched her, as if he might find his own focus in the studious lines of the woman's shoulders and neck.

She was enthralled with the miniature library Japheth had accumulated. She'd selected a few choice tomes and scrolls and tucked them away into her satchel.

To what end, though? Did Seren really care that the Dreamheart's constant handling had finally done its damage? The wizard was just a breath away from abandoning Raidon, despite her grudging acceptance of the terms Raidon had offered her on the ship.

But did it matter? Perhaps the situation was beyond their ability to influence. If Cynosure were still functioning, Raidon might have transported himself directly into Xxiphu. But that was a wish that wasn't going to be granted.

"You've had your ale, Captain," the monk said, his voice raised to break through the babble of a dozen others.

"Can we discuss the idea you mentioned back in Japheth's suite about salvaging the situation?"

"I've had one cupful. That ain't enough to quench my thirst!" Thoster grinned, tossed off the contents of a tankard still a quarter filled with tawny liquid, then burped. His eyes followed the progress of a dark-haired woman across the saloon.

"If the Eldest is fully roused, ale and wenching will be the least of your needs," Raidon said.

The captain guffawed, then pointed. "Here comes your drink. Maybe that'll soothe your sour disposition."

A server, a halfling, stopped at the table. He deposited a tea service before Raidon. Though surprised to see the steaming pot, Raidon tapped his fingers in thanks.

"You ordered this for me?" he asked Thoster.

The captain nodded. "You were busy in Japheth's suite."

When the captain and the wizard had gone on ahead to secure a table, Raidon stayed behind to make certain the dog and the sleeping woman were in good health. He'd explained to Thoster they might yet have need of Anusha. Also, the sword had not wanted him to waste time caring for the woman and beast. Whenever Raidon recognized a "greater good" impulse from Angul coloring his attitude, he tried to take the opposite tack.

Raidon poured a steaming cup and sipped. Warmth filled his mouth and descended to his center. The sharp, green odor and tingling heat did indeed calm his agitated state. He inhaled deeply and caught the captain's eye.

Thoster grinned but refrained from further comment.

The server also set upon the table another foaming mug for the captain and a crystal goblet filled with purple liquid for Seren. Thoster immediately grabbed up his tankard and downed a goodly portion.

Seren looked up from her tome and said, "Raidon, do you remember your promise? You will devote yourself to gathering a lord's treasure when we're done with all this?"

"You have my word," agreed Raidon.

She nodded. "Good. These tomes and scrolls from Japheth's suite—they're not a bad down payment"

The monk nodded, then said, "We need to descend to Xxiphu, it's too late for half measures. Do you know how we can burrow down into the earth to reach the city?"

"Halruaa used to have flying ships," interjected Captain Thoster. "But those are destroyed, save for a scant few."

"What good would that do us?" snapped Seren. "We need to sail the solid veins of dirt and stone below the world. None of those Halruaan craft had that ability."

"Did you ever fly one?"

"They were called flying ships, not burrowing ships, idiot," Seren retorted.

Thoster paused, considering, and took another pull at his ale. He mumbled, "I was hoping you could whip us up some magic sails for Green Siren, or somesuch."

Seren rolled her eyes, then paused. "Hmm. Well, I can't do that. But perhaps... something"

"What?" asked Raidon.

She glanced at the captain. "You remember those albino fish in the pool on Gethshemeth's island? The ones swimming around in that cave where the black dragon ambushed us?"

Thoster nodded.

"When I arrived," said Raidon, "that pool was drained and all the fish in it were dead. I met the dragon. He called himself Scathrys. I left him alone... but Anusha managed to hurt him somehow."

"Really?" Seren asked, then shook her head. "Never mind. Do you remember the fish, Thoster?"

"Aye," Thoster said. "Them and everything else in that accursed room. They were eyeless slivers darting around, each one aglow. At the lip of that pool, Nogah and my first mate died "

"Before she died, Nogah said the fish were rune-scribed creatures," Seren said. "In their presence, she said one

could walk the depths of the sea floor as if strolling a green meadow.”

Thoster wiped foam from his face and said, “Hmm, perhaps my mind was elsewhere. I don’t remember all that. Mayhap because of the kuo-toa trying to kill us?”

“Typical. Well, I know those fish. I remembered an account of similar creatures described in the great library in Silverymoon.”

Raidon nodded, recalling his one visit to that gem of the north during the decade he spent hunting aberrations.

“Does Silverymoon survive?” he wondered.

Seren shrugged. “How should I know? I fled the enclave and gave up the red robe...” a Red robe?” Thoster prodded.

“Forget that. What’s important are the rune fish. They school in the Elemental Chaos, swimming through boiling earth and fire like regular fish through water. They’re called gleamtail jacks.”

“Elemental Chaos, aye, I know that place,” said Thoster, though his tone indicated he was being sarcastic. “Odd Gethshemeth was keeping them.”

“Not at all. They are naturally adept at slipping between boundaries. The great kraken wants to do the same—maybe that’s why it was able to spend so much time breathing air instead of hiding beneath the waves.”

“How does this help us, Seren?” interrupted the monk.

She raised her hands as if in supplication. “Are you an idiot too? If we can secure for ourselves a school of gleamtail jacks, or perhaps just one or two larger specimens, we can use them in a ritual. A ritual that would send us on a trip beneath the Sea of Fallen Stars and even into the earth itself.” The wizard’s eyes glittered at whatever image played behind them.

“How likely are we to achieve that?” Raidon wondered. “Seems like a difficult ritual to perform. In my understanding, extraordinary rituals require extraordinary preparations. We’ve made no preparation.”

"That's where you're wrong, Raidon." So saying, Seren produced from her satchel a bone scroll case. She unscrewed the end and tipped out a dried, smelly shape about the size of Raidon's thumb. It was limp and flaking with rot.

"Hey!" protested Thoster, pulling back his tankard.

"A rune fish," Seren proclaimed, as if showing off a crown jewel.

"This is from Gethshemeth's island?" Raidon asked, pointing at the dried thing lying on the table.

Seren nodded. "I had to have one."

"You were grubbing for one of these here fish as we got ambushed by Gethshemeth's pet kuo-toa?" demanded Thoster, real heat in his voice. "No wonder we got strung up on the yardarm. You weren't doing the job I paid you for!"

Seren narrowed her eyes and replied coolly, "You'd be dead now without my help on that damn island.

Anyhow*you're no longer my employer. Raidon is." The captain stood, leaving his mug behind. He said, "I'll be across the way. I've got a hankering for some cards."

Raidon and Seren watched Thoster leave.

The wizard snorted. "Don't let him fool you, Raidon. He's not mad. He's been itching to lose his coins in a game of chance since we came down here, now he has an excuse."

The monk returned his gaze to the dried fish and said, "So how does this help us, specifically? Can you use it in one of your workings?"

"All things find a use in time," she replied, then said, "Yes. With a little research, and with this specimen in hand, I should be able to modify a summoning ritual and commandeer a school of gleamtail jacks."

"Then we can travel to the aboleth city. I can use my Cerulean Sign to navigate."

"Yes, down to Xxiphu. At least we'll have the comfort of our cabins on Green Siren. Until we arrive at our

destination and are promptly killed and eaten by monsters.”

“I have Angul and this,” said Raidon. He touched his chest. “Two weapons forged to fight aberrations. We are not the ones who will die.”

She studied him a few more moments. Raidon met her scrutiny with a serene expression. He wondered if she was having second thoughts.

Seren shrugged and said, “Come on, let’s go see about purchasing the ritual I need. Someone in Veltalar sold Japheth all his books. They should have what I’m looking for.”

Thoster was absorbed in his cards. Raidon and Seren left him to it while they questioned Lorious patrons. They asked who in Veltalar sold potions and old tomes, and they learned such wares could be had at Rose Keep, a trade enclave on the edge of town.

A Red Wizard enclave. Raidon frowned. He’d been attacked by Red Wizards in the Dragonjaw Mountains years earlier.

Seren was taken aback too. She said, “I should have guessed”

“Guessed what?”

The wizard only shook her head.

Raidon wondered if the trade compound operated beneath the law, but the patrons of the Lorious described the place in an open and nonconspiratorial fashion. Their tones didn’t suggest they were passing on illicit information. The monk would have detected otherwise.

The two of them circled back to Thoster.

“You ready?” Seren said.

“Not hardly! I’m winning. I’m holding on to this hand,” said the captain. His eyes didn’t leave the fan of cards he clutched.

The monk said, “We’ll be back in a few hours.” The captain grunted.

Raidon and Seren walked out of the Lorious into the streets of the city. Clouds drizzled light rain.

As they strolled, Raidon said, "I thought Red Wizards were enemies of Aglarond and anyone not loyal to Thay."

Seren frowned and said, "That was before Szass Tam seized power. Don't you pay any attention to politics?"

"I was frozen in amber for a decade," Raidon said.

"You were insensible for a decade after the Spellplague, right? Szass Tam launched his treachery before the Year of Blue Fire, when you still wandered Faerun killing monsters."

A word stirred in the recesses of Raidon's mind. Something... zulkirs? Yes, the zulkirs—what the lords of Thay were called. They had turned on each other. One claimed the power all had once shared. Or something like that.

He hadn't paid such news much attention, as it hadn't had anything to do with his own situation.

Since he had awakened in the Spellplague's wake and learned about Ailyn's fate, his curiosity had grown even more circumscribed. Passions and interests that once drew him seemed pointless. Normally his focus was enough to sustain him.

He sighed and said, "Let's pretend I know nothing, as you suggest. How is it Red Wizards sell magical wares openly in Veltalar?"

Seren's lips thinned. "Before the troubles, Thay sponsored embassies all around the Sea of Fallen Stars. Each one supported itself by bribing local officials and by providing enchanted wares at just below market prices.

Then Szass Tam declared himself the lone sovereign of Thay. Red Wizards who failed to proclaim their loyalty were deemed traitors*They were marked for death should they, or even their descendents, come within Thay's reach again." Lines of worry wrinkled Seren's brow as she said this last.

Raidon wondered what the woman wasn't telling him, but he decided she'd tell him if it proved important.

Instead he asked, "And the outcast Red Wizards—they still sell magic?"

"Some do," she said. Then she pointed.

Ahead was a walled enclave. The roof of a two-story building and an attached three-story tower rose above scuffed, mortared stone walls. The gates, iron-reinforced oak, were thrown wide.

They walked into an enclosed courtyard.

A red tent squatted in the courtyard's center. Rain beaded on the tent fabric. Its open sides revealed a woman in a red caftan next to a wooden table. Glass vials, scroll cases, and other oddments were laid out in even rows on the flat surface.

"Welcome to Rose Keep," called the woman, her voice raised over the rain's patter. "Come, get out of the weather! Perhaps you'll see something you like." She gestured to her wares and smiled.

They passed beneath the tent's edge and regarded the display. Raidon cast a sidelong glance at the woman, looking for any sign of duplicity. His Sign remained quiescent, at least.

"How's business?" Seren asked.

The woman smiled and said, "I've only just reopened the compound. Things are still a little slow, to be honest.

But I think that as the bad years move farther and farther into the past, Rose Keep will see a resurgence in visitors interested in enchanted wares."

"You're Dhenna Shavres, right?" Seren asked. "Do you think it wise to revive an outlaw enclave so close to the dark mesa?"

Concern and a little fear jolted through the woman. She raised her hands in a warding gesture. She demanded, "Are you sent by Thay to bring me home?"

“Hardly. I’m Seren Juraмот. I was pledged to one of the northern embassies, before Szass Tam... I’m like you. I didn’t return to the homeland. I work for myself now.”

Raidon glanced at Seren. Why hadn’t she mentioned her past allegiance before?

Dhenna Shavres lowered her hands a fraction. She watched Seren, waiting for a false move. Then she said, “Seren... I recall that name. You were the one who secured a particularly advantageous trade opportunity in Raven’s Bluff. We were all jealous here in Rose Keep.”

“Right. Before everything went to the Hells,” Seren said.

“Of course! Now I remember! You disappeared with the treasury of the Raven’s Bluff enclave. You must be quite a wealthy woman.”

“That’s a lie! I didn’t...”

Silence grew. Dhenna studied Seren, her eyes calculating.

Raidon moved a step forward and bowed. He said, “I am Raidon Kane, once of Telflamm. I have secured Seren’s commission, and I can assure you, I have no interest in Thayan power struggles or Red Wizards. We are looking for a ritual and perhaps some healing balms if you have any, nothing else. Be at ease.”

Dhenna started to respond, then glanced at door of the building behind her. Raidon noticed the door was ajar, and the figure of a child peered out.

“Mother? Your voice was raised...”

“It’s fine, dear,” Dhenna said. “I was merely startled to discover an old acquaintance, that’s all.”

The figure in the doorway gave a tentative nod, then withdrew.

“You have a child?” asked Seren.

Dhenna nodded. “My daughter’s a quick study. She’ll master the new weft of magic far better than I ever will.”

Seren nodded. Raidon saw some of the tension fall from her shoulders. Seren offered her hand. “It is nice to meet you in person, Dhenna.”

“Likewise,” said the Red Wizard, still tentative. Raidon saw the woman waging war in some inner conflict. Was she still scared Seren was here on Thay’s behalf? Possibly, though by the way the woman watched Seren, he didn’t think Dhenna was frightened any longer. Her expression grew calculating, then cold, as if she’d decided something important.

The monk shook his head, clearing away the useless thoughts. Angul was growing restive in his sheath, and his focus had slipped when he saw the little girl. Without it, he was actually in danger of feeling true emotion. Trying to guess the motives of others made him vulnerable to reliving his own losses.

He said, “What can you offer us in elemental summoning rituals?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Darroch Castle, Feywild

Japheth tumbled into a dark well of his own making. He lunged for the collapsing edges of his cloak, straining to hold himself in the world. He failed, his fingers were already clenched around the Dreamheart. From it, energy trickled into his flesh, and from his flesh into his cloak. A cloak whose folds held hidden corridors. The Dreamheart opened a chasm and he fell out of Faerun and toward its fey echo. Without Anusha.

Japheth struggled for breath, as much from the pain spiking his chest as from the realization he'd left Anusha behind. The crazed, sword-wielding monk, so desperate to destroy the stone, had her now. He groaned, trying to reverse his fall through darkness bounded by what seemed to be fluttering bat wings. The traversal was taking far longer than it ever had before.

Why so long? Probably because he hadn't left his cloak behind to serve as a bridge. With no clear starting point, he was adrift. Could he become lost in this nonspace among the boundaries between the planes?

His heart took on a cadence more akin to the frantic flapping all around him. Japheth pulled more energy out of the Dreamheart and concentrated on the Feywild cavern that held Darroch Castle.

A haze of new strength wormed up Japheth's arms, warm and sickening. He seized that strength and tried to concentrate on his destination.

Instead, crazed images sleeted across his consciousness.

He saw a mountain-sized obelisk, scarred and pitted with time's unforgiving passage, held in the deep earth's firm grasp. But time's scars couldn't hide the obelisk's awful visage, its towering size and breadth, and the dark cavities

that opened into a tunneled, hollow interior. The obelisk swarmed with gobbets of living slime. One was larger than all the rest, it reclined atop the obelisk like a throne. The mere suggestion of its visage yanked a scream from his lips.

The image blurred away but was replaced by another. It was Anusha, in a misted place. She was trying to tell him something, something very important. Her eyes were wild with the intensity of her desire to be heard.

Japheth recognized his dream. But he wasn't sleeping. The forlorn image assaulted his waking mind. The vision coiled up out of the Dreamheart like smoke lifting off burning incense.

The warlock dropped the Dreamheart. "No!" he said, straining for it as he and the sphere fell into the cave of Darroch Castle.

He tumbled into a heap, managing to save his head by throwing his arms in front of his face.

The Dreamheart rolled a few feet, then caught up in a gully.

Japheth got to his feet. His chest felt like it was on fire, and now his arms hurt too.

He regarded the shadowed keep, home of the Lord of Bats. A central spire rose above the castle walls. Immense wings stretched out from each side of the castle's spire, rapacious and dragonlike in their span. The cavern ceiling was a stalactite-toothed expanse thick with chittering bats.

He retrieved the relic, using the folds of his cloak to insulate his skin from its touch. Probably should have done that last time, he reflected.

When he was in the world, he stored bulky items in the cloak's extraspatial depths. Could he do the same here?

He concentrated, then passed the orb into it. The Dreamheart disappeared.

Suddenly alarmed, he reversed the process. The sphere returned. Satisfied, he banished it again. Whatever odd

space items disappeared into when he stored them, the facility remained operational in the Feywild too.

Japheth advanced, treading on a growth of purple mushrooms—the same damned caps he’d used to brew Anusha’s elixir of sleep. He stamped once for good measure, then moved on.

At the gates, he called, “Open!”

Wrinkled homunculi peered at him over the walls, then ducked back. A moment later, the gate mechanism clanged and chattered. The gate slabs opened like the petals of a black dahlia. He proceeded down the entry gauntlet into the foyer lit by emerald firelight, past a shadowed pool, and up four flights of stairs guarded by silent, motionless figures in obscuring shrouds.

Japheth burst into the grand study slightly out of breath. His eyes slid past the paintings, the sculptures, and the collected oddities of centuries. He studied the balcony overlooking the chamber. The balcony was bare but for an iron door. It was closed.

The warlock blew his cheeks out in relief. He’d half expected to find the Lord of Bats standing there waiting for him, free of the compulsion Japheth had trapped him with.

He ascended the stairs, pulled out a key, and unlocked the door.

A feast was laid out in the room beyond.

Yellow light flickered across a great oak table. Chocolates were heaped on silver platters, pale green grapes tumbled from golden urns, and violet wines sparkled in crystal decanters. Chairs lined the sides of the table, each one a tale of unique workmanship.

A man sat in the chair at the head of the table. He was thin, bald, and pale, with narrow squinting eyes, pointed ears, and drab black clothes.

He wasn’t really a man, of course. He was an archfey named Neifion in his least form. He sat as he always sat, where Japheth had bound him, in a Feast Never Ending.

Neifion looked up. His eyes narrowed on Japheth, but he said nothing as he chewed a portion of rare meat.

Blood dribbled from his lips.

“Lord of Bats,” Japheth said. “Greetings. I have need of your aid.”

“You’re still alive?” Neifion asked, and sawed another slice of flank steak from his plate.

“For the moment. Had any more visits from your friends?”

The archfey shrugged, then quaffed a large quantity of wine from the decanter at his left, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. If anything, the decanter seemed fuller than it was before the Lord of Bats drank from it.

Japheth could compel the creature to answer truthfully, but he decided to save his energies. Neither the interfering eladrin noble nor Anusha’s half brother Behroun were there—that was obvious. Soon Japheth would be on his way.

“Malyanna has been here since you fled with your tail between your legs, now that you mention it,” Neifion volunteered, his voice casual. “She and her pet human are eager for the wealth I’ll deliver them when they destroy your pact stone. Me, I’m eager for a taste of your liver. I can’t decide between one big braised steak or many small slices good for frying and dipping in chocolate sauce. What do you think?”

Japheth kept his face expressionless. He said, “If Malyanna and Behroun planned on breaking the pact stone, they would have already. They’re playing you, Neifion. They have no intention of ever helping you.”

The Lord of Bats grimaced. He plunged his fork into a glistening miniature sugared pear and shoved it into his mouth. He announced, matter-of-factly, “I shall murder you in a manner so hideous that Orcus himself will grow pale to think on it.”

“Neifion, I command you, cease with your threats for today.”

The Lord of Bats froze in his seat, shuddered as if with the slightest of chills, then continued eating.

The warlock studied the pale figure, wondering if his command had accidentally dislodged Neifion from the enchanted feast.

The Lord of Bats sucked down another bloody red tomato, but his eyes never left Japheth's. His gaze was as red as the fruit he ate. Japheth looked away.

This was going to be difficult. He risked his life and probably even his soul in tampering with Neifion's magical confinement. But the eladrin noble and Lord Marhana would probably free the Lord of Bats soon enough.

Better Japheth do so in a manner that might, if he were careful, preserve his tentative control over the Lord of Bats's actions.

"Neifion," he began, "you will help me achieve an end I seek. In return for your pledged aid—aid free of any duplicity—I will release you from the Feast Never Ending. What say you?"

"I assent," the Lord of Bats instantly replied. Then he laughed, sending malign echoes darting around the hall.

Japheth knew the creature was trying to rattle him—well, he hoped so. If the Lord of Bats had planned for this moment, then Japheth was probably already dead.

The warlock squared his shoulders and pressed on. "Then make your pledge, Neifion. If I do not like it, you'll stay seated until you devise one I do."

The hairless man touched his nose with a slender, bloodless finger. He looked up as if searching for inspiration in the rafters. Then he spoke. "If you release me from the Feast Never Ending, Japheth my pact-stealing prodigal, I swear to act as your ally, to treat you as I would a friend despite my hate and hunger, and to not secretly work against your goals. I swear this on the pact stone itself, the source of your power over me and the conduit by which you

borrow my abilities. I swear all these things if you release me now.”

Japheth thought through the man’s words. He’d have liked to scribe them and spend the night studying each one.

He’d have liked to ask the creature to also swear on his title, the Lord of Bats, and on the cloak he wore—Neifion’s lesser skin, the Shroud of Wings. But time wasn’t his ally. He waved his hand and spoke. “Stand from the Feast Never Ending, Neifion, and keep your word lest the Feast pull you back and bind you eternally.”

The pale man slowly pushed back from the table. He wiped his chin on his dark sleeve and stood. He screamed in a voice suddenly deeper and more resonant than before, “Free!”

Japheth involuntarily took a half pace back.

Neifion grinned, cocked his head to the side, and said, “What crazed effort have you in mind, my future meal, that you would risk holding me off at the end of a sworn oath?”

Japheth considered, but before he could answer, the Lord of Bats motioned toward the exit and said, “Let’s talk in the grand study. This place is no longer to my taste.” The creature guffawed at his own pun, then brushed past Japheth and exited the room of his long confinement.

The warlock followed the Lord of Bats down into the grand study, wondering if he was allowing the archfey too much autonomy.

Neifion stood in the center of the ornamental chamber and stretched, grinning around with undisguised glee.

“It’s good to see my collections again.”

Japheth moved to a large overstuffed leather chair and threw himself down. He was exhausted. It was good to sit.

The Lord of Bats snapped his fingers. Something in the wall shifted, and a wrinkled homunculus crawled out of a hole in the wainscoting. Neifion, his grin still intact, said, “Fetch me some real food!”

The creature scampered off down the main stairs without a glance at Japheth. The skin on the warlock's face tightened. Should he gainsay Neifion's request? No. The oath Neifion swore didn't prevent the creature from taking his own initiative. However, commanding the actions of his old servitors, which was a right Japheth retained, tread dangerously close to a freedom the warlock didn't want to contemplate.

Since he'd gained control of the castle and the Lord of Bats's servitors, Japheth had refrained from calling upon many of the powers that were his due. He'd worried he might wake some resonance between Neifion and an old perquisite of his station powerful enough to shake the creature from his enchanted feast—or worse, from the poorly worded pact that had allowed Japheth to assume control of far more than the Lord of Bats ever meant to allow.

But even if he hadn't feared releasing the Lord of Bats by making free use of the creature's resources, Japheth didn't like to demand service of the homunculi too often. When he did so, he always felt guilty. Their origin was too ghastly.

The little horrors were once humans, or eladrin maybe. Their sad appearance was what was left after the Lord of Bats slaked his soul and blood thirst on each. What remained was a dried-up husk of flesh and spirit, a wrinkled remnant whose mind retained only enough wit to follow the commands of the Lord of Bats and whose body hovered somewhere between life and necromantic animation. Japheth hadn't delved into it closely enough to determine which was the case.

Neifion glanced at Japheth, at Japheth's cloak, then yelled down the stairs after the patter of tiny feet, "And bring me a suit from my wardrobe! The obsidian ensemble. Don't forget the boots!"

Japheth watched the Lord of Bats move around the chamber, waving his arms and stamping his legs as if to

force feeling into them. The enchantment of the Feast Never Ending had kept Neifion preserved against death, obesity, and even the need for a toilet. Regardless, the creature probably was somewhat stiff after having been forced to sit for the last few years, despite his enchanted repast and his own supernatural vigor.

Then an image of Anusha sleeping for tendays came to Japheth and he grimaced. Keeping the girl fed and healthy had required a magical working. Luckily, he'd hit on adapting an aspect of the Feast Never Ending that kept her alive so long as she slept. One more injustice he'd dealt Anusha. At least she wouldn't perish of malnutrition.

After that, he'd spent all his time trying to devise a ritual to free her mind. And now the girl was shorn from him, in Raidon's hands.

Would the half-elf look after her? Yes. The monk was a self-proclaimed hero. He'd appeared out of nowhere to help Anusha free Japheth and the others. Instead of fleeing in the face of almost certain death, like any common person, he'd helped them defeat Gethshemeth.

But now Raidon was apparently working with Captain Thoster and Seren... and those two were likely to toss the girl aside if her care became inconvenient. Then again, perhaps they'd see that keeping her safe was a bargaining chip useful against him. Maybe they'd think they could trade her for the Dreamheart. To do so, they'd have to keep Anusha safe.

Either way, a champion like Raidon would protect Anusha regardless of how the other two might use her to influence Japheth. Right?

He uttered a silent plea to the uncaring gods that Anusha remain secure in his absence.

An ornate device of golden metal squatting in one corner clicked and began to chime, pulling the warlock from his reverie.

The Lord of Bats was still in the chamber. He was just shrugging into a stylishly cut black coat, one whose perfectly tailored lines screamed great expense. A homunculus stood to one side, still holding black gloves, a bloodred cravat, and a pair of supple leather boots.

"Neifion," the warlock said, "we need to travel down, below the world's crust where no tunnels reach."

"The world? You want me to cross over to the other side?"

Japheth nodded.

The Lord of Bats cracked a rare smile of pleasure and said, "I think this new accommodation between us may work out after all." He adjusted his cravat with hands the color of porcelain. Even when he'd possessed his full complement of power, the creature had a difficult time entering the world without an invitation.

"Passing back into Toril is the least of our tasks. Do you know a way to travel as deeply below ground as I have indicated?"

Neifion put a finger to his chin. "How did you arrive here still wearing the cloak? Even for one such as I, the skin must be left behind to serve as a bridge."

Some inner instinct warned Japheth against revealing the relic. "I utilized, ah, a ritual to provide extra energy. It was enough to pull the far end of the path along with me."

"Then use the same ritual again, maggot. You managed to travel all the way here with a single step. Shouldn't be any harder to get anywhere else. And I think I would like to learn this ritual for myself. Sounds like an impressive bit of sorcery." The pale creature in its black noble's garb squinted at Japheth in a speculative fashion.

The more he considered revealing his possession of the Dreamheart to the nearly free-willed Lord of Bats, the worse the idea sounded. He'd do so only if Neifion couldn't provide some other method.

Japheth finally replied, "I used up the components for that ritual, and I can't procure more without months of

searching. We are nearly out of time. I need a quicker option. Do you have any?"

The Lord of Bats brushed some unseen piece of lint from his sleeves. "I know you're lying to me, 'ally,' but let's leave that for now. I know several other ways to travel, even through water or solid earth should it come to it. In my centuries of existence, many creatures have made pacts with me and yet owe me favors. I know one who will provide the kind of transport you desire."

"One we can ride safely wherever I direct?"

"Nay, one who will lower us through dimensional barriers in an enchanted planar bell, a trek bell. A trek bell already in my collection. I used it when I sought out one of the fomorian courts, hoping to draw the malformed ones into a pact of mutual convenience."

"I don't know what a trek bell is. Tell me."

"That doesn't surprise me, given your atrophied wit. Follow me and you'll find out," said the Lord of Bats. He walked down the side hall plastered with faded tapestries.

Japheth followed. A couple of homunculi fell in behind, but Japheth shooed them away. The Lord of Bats glanced back and frowned, but held his tongue.

The warlock had ventured down the tapestried passage once after gaining control of the castle. The musty smell of the wall hangings had turned his stomach, and he abandoned his exploration after opening three or four doors onto rooms heaped with nameless detritus. Neifion marched to a door about halfway down the hall. It slammed open with the Lord of Bats's merest touch, sending echoes down the corridor. He glanced back and nodded. "I keep many interesting things back here.

Some quite lethal. It's fortunate you never poked around back here without me. Heh. Fortunate for you, I mean."

Japheth followed the archfey into a high chamber thick with the odor of mildew and old rot. Objects whose true

shapes were shrouded beneath oilskin tarps cluttered the space.

Neifion wound his way to the chamber's far end, where a large article stood alone beneath a swath of fabric.

With a showman's flourish, Neifion whipped away the tarp.

A dull iron bell stood on wooden blocks. It was immense. If actually a bell, it must have once swung in the belfry of a temple whose prayer call reverberated for miles. The warlock figured four or five people could easily fit up inside with room to spare.

Runes with angular, harsh lines traced a spiraling path around the bell. The strange letters reminded the warlock of the Dwarvish script, but these seemed more primitive.

"This is a trek bell. It will protect us in nearly any medium," said the Lord of Bats. "And it can be lowered through earth and stone as easily as through water, or even through dimensional walls under certain circumstances."

"Hmm," replied Japheth. "What about the clapper?"

"It has none."

"Ah. How does pne enter?"

Neifion said, "It doesn't surprise me a moron like you couldn't figure that out. The entire bottom is open—it's called a moon well. Means entrance and view port all in one. This trek bell has two chambers, each large enough for a couple of travelers of your size. Easily large enough to accommodate you and me, and perhaps a servitor or two."

Japheth kneeled by the bell and looked beneath, careful not to dislodge the wooden blocks. The bell's bottom was wide open, save for a central bulwark dividing the open space in two. Each half chamber contained a curving seat, apparently for passengers. "Hmm." He did not really understand how it could work.

"You mentioned earlier," said Japheth, allowing his hand to glide along the bell's cool, smooth surface, "that you knew of an entity who would lower us in this?"

Neifion flicked his arms in a manner reminiscent of a bat fluttering its wings. "Yes. Are we ready to depart?"

"Nearly." Japheth clapped his hands and concentrated.

A flurry of winged forms swept into the chamber, followed by one of the homunculi he had chased away earlier. Apparently it hadn't gone far. The warlock pointed at the wrinkled little man and said, "Prepare a pack for me that includes two tendays' worth of dried food from the pantry. Make it a large pack with extra space.

Don't forget water!"

The homunculus scurried off, but the bats continued to flit around the chamber.

Neifion frowned. He didn't like to be reminded who actually held the reins of power in Darroch Castle. Too bad, thought Japheth.

They waited in silence. Neifion stared at Japheth, grinning with his needle-sharp teeth. The creature was happy to be free and would fight like the monster he was when it was time for Japheth to seat him again before the Feast Never Ending. Trying to imagine how he might accomplish that made the warlock's stomach hurt. The Lord of Bats wouldn't fall for the same trick twice, but it wouldn't do to leave the creature free to plot. Perhaps he would have to slay Neifion. That would strip all of Japheth's power... which wasn't an option. As soon as Japheth lost his power and patron, his addiction to traveler's dust would overwhelm him. If Japheth was to live, so must the Lord of Bats, even though the creature spent all his spare moments devising plans against the warlock.

No wonder his stomach hurt.

The homunculus returned to the chamber, hauling a large pack behind it. Japheth hoisted the pack and looked inside. The creature had done as he had asked. He sent the pack into his cloak. "I'm ready, Neifion. Get on with it."

The Lord of Bats's grin stretched wider. He was a grotesque creature, Japheth reflected. Nightmarish. And of

the fey, who were known to be duplicitous. If the Lord of Bats could twist his oath or shuck himself free of it completely, he would do so without compunction. Neifion burst into a chant, his voice melodious and heavy. "O divine servant, I summon you by virtue of the pacts sworn by your masters and by the divine knowledge given me through their intervention. I conjure you by the articles of those pacts, which mark and express the strictures you cannot ignore. I conjure you by the name Mapathious, your true name—that I, having pronounced it, and I, having secured the agreement of your masters, may summon you."

The warlock listened and watched.

When Neifion fell silent, Japheth looked around. The homunculus crouched beneath the bell as if hiding. The bats he'd earlier summoned swirled one last time around the chamber and fled through the open door.

Wind screamed through the chamber, and light burst from a point in the air two paces from the Lord of Bats.

The point of brilliance swelled instantly, forming the shape of a large creature with wings of molten fire. It was humanoid, but only just. Porcelain white skin made its featureless face a mask, but for eyes the color of a glacier. The creature's lower body trailed away into ethereal mist, but its torso and arms were protected by elaborate golden plate armor. A sword of quivering lava matching its wings was clutched in one hand.

"An angel of exploration," said Neifion. "It will serve me, for a time. Long enough to ferry us in the trek bell to our destination."

The creature flexed its wings, dripping sizzling gobbets of magma on the floor.

"Will it answer to me?" inquired Japheth. He concentrated, looking for an answer to his own question. He sensed none of the lines of connection he usually was able to fumble for when accessing the Lord of Bats's abilities.

“You’ll not leave me behind so easily,” said Neifion. “The angel answers to me, and that is not a bargain I can alter. As we originally agreed, I will be accompanying you on your journey. I am your newly minted ally, and I want to personally help you achieve the success you so richly deserve.”

“I’m sure.”

“As your ally, I can do no less.”

Japheth frowned. But he produced from his pouch the iron ring that contained a strand of Anusha’s hair. “This’ll help your angel find Xxiphu. The dream of her to whom it belongs is trapped there.”

CHAPTER NINE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren docked in Veltalar, Aglarond

Raidon sat, his back against the port rail with his legs folded, watching the wizard.

Seren paced Green Siren's deck. She paused, bent, and with quick strokes made a change to a sigil she'd chalked earlier. The alteration was too subtle for Raidon to tell any real difference. The sigil was just one of hundreds that, in sum, formed a wide circle of arcane script in the open area between the central masts.

Seren scribed, Raidon watched, and every so often Thoster turned up with a vaguely worried expression. He heard Green Siren's crew going about general repairs and, farther off, other ships on the dock being loaded and unloaded. The squealing cries of gulls were an omnipresent counterpoint.

The monk knew the broad outline of Seren's plan to enhance the ship, she said she could make it briefly able to travel the deeps. Something to do with creating the proper resonance between the ship, its crew, and the elemental creatures she hoped to summon.

Raidon was content to watch, but Thoster kept popping up to pester the wizard. And... there he was again. The monk fixed the captain with a scowl, but the man failed to notice.

"What's that for?" said Thoster.

Seren had replaced her chalk with an odiferous fish corpse. It was the gleamtail jack she'd retrieved from the pool on Gethshemeth's isle. She bent, and with a wide stroke gave one of the sigils a greasy highlight.

The captain said, "I doubt that's sanitary."

Raidon considered asking Thoster to stop bothering Seren. She had things in hand and didn't need distractions.

Watching the woman eye each symbol critically before moving to the next, he decided to remain silent. If she were perturbed, she would tell Thoster to leave off herself. She wasn't shy.

He recalled his and Seren's visit to Rose Keep and recognized again he didn't know much about the wizard. He wondered why she'd decided to renounce Thay...

Raidon breathed out and tried once more to let go of worry and embrace his focus. He had a quest to fulfill.

Nothing else really mattered. Seren rolled a scroll out on a barrelhead and fixed the ends down with ballast stones. The gleamtail jack had stained her white clothing with streaks of green and brown. He couldn't recall ever seeing the woman's garments so dirty before.

The wizard noticed him looking, and with a wink and a whispered syllable, her gown was as unsoiled as ever.

She said, "Don't worry, Raidon. I'm usually clean as the driven snow."

"Ah... good to know."

"Hey," said Thoster, "done?"

"With the preparations. Now comes the incantation. Performing this part of the ritual will require another few hours, I think. It's hard to say for certain."

"Hmm. Seems like the kind of thing you'd know with greater certainty," said Thoster. "If you're calling up some swarm of beasties from the Chaos, I think—"

Seren said, "Captain, I'm adapting a rite meant for another purpose to our needs. I've already explained this is somewhat experimental."

The captain grunted. Then he said, "So you have. Sorry." He doffed his hat and continued, "I promise not to trouble you again until you ask for help."

Seren said, "Thanks." She placed the dead and ragged gleamtail jack in the center of the summoning circle.

Thoster said, "Poor little fish. A sadder symbol to launch our epic voyage I can't imagine."

Seren broke out laughing, and Thoster joined her. Raidon frowned.

“So,” said Thoster, “since this ain’t been tried before, care to hazard a guess on what else to watch for?”

The wizard said, “I’ll be calling into the realm where boundaries mean little and where gleamtail jacks school through the Chaos. I’m after the fish, but it’s possible something else could get caught up in the summoning—something more dangerous and hungry.”

“What are the chances of that happening?” Raidon said.

“Small. But real,” Seren said. “When I near the end of the ritual, it wouldn’t hurt for us to be on our guard.”

“Should I cast off, then?” said Thoster. Seren considered. “Yes. When I finish performing the ritual, the gleamtails appearing through the portal could draw quite a crowd. I don’t relish such attention.”

The captain said, “I can’t imagine anything better!” Then he shouted to his crew, “Listen up, you miserable sacks! Cast off! Take us out of port. Take a heading due west until I tell you different!”

Sailors jumped at Thoster’s voice. Even before he was done speaking, men and women began preparations to disembark. Activity swarmed the deck.

Raidon paid the bustling crew no attention, he closed his eyes and meditated. When he was able to force all thoughts from his head, he could achieve a singularly peaceful—

A voice from the dock broke into his blank sanctuary. “Hold, Green Siren! You’re not cleared to depart!”

Raidon opened his eyes. A small force of soldiers was assembled at the end of the gangplank. He didn’t know how long they’d been there.

The captain, who had made his way some distance down the deck, turned and yelled, “What’re you going on about? We paid the docking fee!”

A man with a dagger naked in his hand stepped forward. He wore black leather armor and a red face mask. His eyes

glittered with winter ice. He said, "I'm not the dockmaster — my name is Morgenthel. You are sheltering a criminal. Thay has ordered her repatriation so she can face her crimes. Her name is Seren Juramot!" He pointed at the wizard. "Send her across!"

Seren said to no one in particular, "Dhenna Shavres, you bitch."

Raidon flexed his hands and stretched his legs.

Thoster yelled, "A criminal? I'm surprised Aglarond would take Thay's side in anything."

"I am not of Aglarond. I am collecting a bounty set by the regent. "

Seren put a hand to her mouth.

Raidon said, "She's not going anywhere. Seren forswore Thay. She's—"

Morgenthel interrupted, "Wrong! Seren didn't forswear Thay. The opposite. She made the smart move, she proclaimed Szass Tam her regent."

Raidon, Thoster, and several nearby crew members glanced at the wizard.

Seren tried to meet Raidon's gaze. "I..." The man in the red face mask continued, "She can't deny it. Truth is, to demonstrate her loyalty to the new regime, she pledged the Raven's Bluff Red Wizard enclave's treasury to Szass Tam's war coffers!"

Thoster said, "Seren's worked on Green Siren for mercenary pay at least a year. I'm certain she ain't got a treasury tucked away anywhere. You sure you got your facts straight?"

Morgenthel nodded. "It's her. She retrieved the treasury, but she never brought it to Thay. A failure that rose to Szass Tam's attention. Not a healthy status to attain. He declared her a traitor and put a price on her head."

Seren said, "It wasn't my fault! I secured the hoard, I was on my way. But think, Morgenthel! I was waylaid by the

Year of Blue Fire just like everyone else. I lost the treasury and, for a time, even my magic! It's not my fault!"

Morgenthel shrugged. "None of that really matters, does it? A bounty's been placed on you, and I'm here to collect you, alive or dead. The regent can interrogate your corpse if you don't come willingly."

Raidon wondered if the wizard was so desperate for treasure because she needed it to make amends with Thay.

Whatever the truth, it was interfering with his own need. He didn't want messy complications. He expanded his chest to accommodate a slow, deep breath.

The monk said, "She's not coming with you. Seren is in my employ. When we finish our task, Seren's reward will be a treasure perhaps twice as large as she lost. Enough to pay off the price on her head."

Morgenthel snickered. "Do you really think that matters?"

Seren said, "Enough!" She pulled her wand. It spat green flames across the railing at the bounty hunter.

Morgenthel raised the dagger in his hand. The flame veered and caught on the dagger's tip. There, it spat and burned, caught like an animal brought up short by its leash. He yelled to his force, "Take the ship!"

People in leather armor surged up the gangplank, though the gangway's width only allowed two at a time.

"Cast off!" Thoster bellowed and unsheathed his golemwork sword. He slashed one of the thick hawser tie-downs holding the ship at dock. His crew rushed to emulate their captain.

Raidon stepped to the head of the plank to meet the boarders. He felt energy unfurling through his body, anticipating the contest.

The first two down the plank wielded hatchets. One charged him, the other threw her hatchet before closing.

The monk knocked the spinning hatchet out of the air with a slapping parry. The other axe, still clutched in its attacker's hand, he sidestepped. Even as the strike whistled

past his shoulder, he swung one arm around and caught the wrist holding the weapon. He twisted the man's wrist and pulled it simultaneously. The man gasped and the hatchet fell free.

Raidon kept his grip on the wrist and held it just so, bones cracked. Then he shoved on the limb, keeping it rigidly twisted as he pushed. The man tripped backward, screaming in pain at his now loosely flopping arm, and slammed into the boarder immediately behind him. Both fell, one into the water.

Seren brandished her wand again. This time she ignored Morgenthel. A miniature ice storm erupted across the gangplank. The angled path became a winter slide. With cries of dismay, a quarter of the attacking force slid off either side and down the icy slope.

The bounty hunter's confident visage melted into a glower of hate. He yelled, "Take them!"

The majority of the boarders managed to keep their feet on the ice-slicked plank. They scrambled forward.

Raidon's roundhouse kick broke the first one's ribs even as it propelled him diagonally into the water. The second attacker, wielding a chain, spun and released.

The half-elf dipped his head back just enough to avoid the iron ball at the chain's end, then cut forward inside the radius of the swing. Before the chain wielder could whip the chain around a second time, Raidon stomped his instep, kneed him in the groin, and punched him in the throat. The fellow crumpled, losing his grip on his chain, which sailed backward toward the dock.

The plank shuddered, sending three more attackers into the bay. The monk retreated to solid ship decking. With a rending shriek, the gangplank suddenly ripped free of its pier mooring. Those closest to the dock leaped back to safety, but the remaining would-be boarders fell into the chop.

Green Siren had caught some wind in its deployed sails and was heading out of dock. A cheer leaped from the mouths of the crew. Thoster grinned and raised his sword.

Raidon watched Morgenthel. The man was livid. He yelled across the widening gap, "I'll find you again!" He raised his dagger, on which green fire still glimmered, and pointed it at Seren. "I have your scent!" Seren's eyes narrowed with concern. But she raised her chin. "The regent doesn't accept failure from his underlings, Morgenthel, no matter how insignificant they are in his hierarchy. I'm proof of that. This marks your first failure. How many more before he replaces you?"

She sniffed and turned away.

Raidon stayed on deck. He watched the furious bounty hunter and Veltalar slowly recede as Green Siren sailed west.

The man's revelation concerning Seren disturbed Raidon. She hadn't been forthright with him. He couldn't do anything about it now, he didn't want to take the time trying to replace her with a spellcaster shadowed with less history and fewer enemies. Also, Seren had a strategy for reaching Xxiphu. How many wizards could do the same, especially given how many had lost their spells altogether? There was nothing for it but to move ahead with the plan.

Besides, if they reached Xxiphu, Seren's history wouldn't matter. In Raidon's estimation, neither she, nor he, nor anyone aboard Green Siren was likely to survive the trip.

CHAPTER TEN

The Year of the Secret (196 DR), Xxiphu

The women walked away from the luminous face of trapped dreams. They pressed forward into a darkness that settled on them like layers of weightless black gauze.

Anusha gripped Yeva's shoulder. The metal of the woman's pauldrons bit her palm with a chill sting.

"Do you know where you're going?" Anusha asked.

"No," Yeva returned. "We walk until we find the far wall. Then we trace it around until we find the exit."

They continued forward through a gloom whose depths seemed more unfathomable with every step.

The woman she'd liberated from the ice dressed oddly, more so than anyone she'd previously known. At that thought, Anusha realized her own dream form was wearing the party gown she apparently unconsciously preferred.

Anusha imagined herself wearing the golden dream armor she had mentally fashioned to face down the watery hag aboard Green Siren. The smooth tumble of her gown stiffened, becoming steel hard. Solidity flowed across her body, encasing her in a Arm shell of protection. She flexed her gauntlets, articulated with flawless joints.

She was fitted in her golden panoply, a suit of armor that enjoyed, she imagined, breathtaking strength and beauty.

Anusha raised her free hand and called for her sword. Light burst upon them, glowing from the slender blade.

Its shape was the same as the one hanging over the fireplace in the great room of her family estate. In life, it was too heavy for her to wield. In her dream, she raised it as easily as a switch of hazel.

Yeva said, "Light! Why didn't you summon that earlier? And I see you've changed your likeness..."

Anusha asked, "Do you like it?"

Yeva laughed in her curt manner, then grew serious. "Your dream is stronger than mere fancy, I sense. What is the secret of your power, Anusha?"

Anusha said, "If I knew that, perhaps I could figure out how to get us out of here." Her thoughts darted to Japheth, and how he'd tried to pull her free. And failed. She knew his game, and it offered her nothing except her current circumstance. She wouldn't let her guard down again, regardless of his charm. And good looks. She frowned and tried to shove thoughts of Japheth from her mind.

They walked on in silence. Even their footsteps made no sound. Because we're not really here, of course, Anusha thought.

Then her sword's light revealed a wall. It was carved from obsidian, obsidian that was not merely glassy black but stained with reflective hues of red, brown, gray, and green. The wall receded to the left and right, and upward.

"Which way?" said Anusha.

Yeva trudged right. Anusha kept pace.

They walked along the slightly curved wall for some time, though it was probably much shorter than it seemed.

Suddenly the mottled woman stopped and said, "By Diomar's Black Ring. We're walking in circles!"

"What?"

"This is the second time we've passed here. See how the red splotch on this outcrop makes a shape like a tree? I noted it last time we passed—it reminded me of an old shadowtop. And here it is again." The woman traced the line of color on the wall. Anusha saw that the pattern in the stone resembled a sprawling, shadowtop tree.

A new thought came to Anusha. She slapped her forehead. "Why are we letting a simple wall stop us? We've no bodies to be trapped!"

Anusha made as if to walk into the glassy surface, but Yeva grabbed her armored arm.

"Wait! What are you doing?"

Anusha smiled and said, "We're dreams, Yeva. We can pass through doors and walls as easily as thinking about it."

Yeva gave a half shake of her head but said, "I suppose that must be true. But isn't it dangerous? What if the wall is like the ice?"

Anusha paused. She said, "I don't get that feeling. Nor do I see any shapes of people stuck inside..."

Yeva took a deep breath and slowly nodded.

Anusha grabbed the woman's hand. "Don't worry. We'll go through together."

They walked into the opaque obsidian. She pushed through what felt like the filmiest of veils, drawing her companion behind her.

After just three paces, they were through.

There was no ground beyond the wall, and Anusha fell. She screamed despite herself. She released her hold on Yeva and her sword, scrabbling for purchase on the surface from which she'd just emerged. That turned out to be as easy as wishing it—Anusha immediately stopped sliding.

Yeva popped out of the wall and reacted similarly, though she didn't scream. Anusha had collected herself just enough to reach out and snag one of Yeva's flailing wrists before the woman dropped away. She yelled, "Grab onto the wall! It will hold you if you believe it can!"

Yeva slapped her other hand to the slick, obsidian surface. Whether because of her own force of will or Anusha's, the woman stopped sliding.

Anusha's shining sword was gone, but it would return if she imagined it. However, the area was illuminated by a dim, directionless light.

Open air stretched away around them. Grinding, scraping noises echoed through it, and after a moment, Anusha saw their source.

Long stone spans arched out across the area, many apparently extending from above. As each span curved outward, its diameter narrowed. A sphere hung at the end

of each stone beam, attached by some sort of elaborate harness. Some spheres were large as houses. Most of the largest orbs sprouted smaller stone arms of their own, to which much smaller spheres were attached. Each globe seemed carved of a different material, some stony, others metallic. The golden sphere not more than a hundred feet from them looked like yellow calcite, while its smaller moon looked like sandstone. More distant spheres had textures and hues reminiscent of jasper, silver, and other minerals and metals.

"It moves!" Yeva exclaimed.

Anusha saw the woman spoke true. The great arms advanced slowly, ponderously, but noticeably around the immense space, transcribing great circles. The smaller stone spans protruding from the largest spheres visibly spun so that the least orbs nearly whipped around the larger ones like... moons, in truth.

Encompassing the entire vast space were walls that extended from a pit of darkness below up to more indefinite gloom high above. The walls were illuminated by huge patches of what Anusha guessed might be mold that glowed pale and icy.

She looked at the obsidian surface they'd emerged from. It curved away in all directions.

"We're on a sphere too," Anusha said. "The largest, around which all these others spin."

They watched the stately rotation of the great mechanism. They were like flies on a waterwheel, and just as ignorant of its function.

Yeva said, "It seems like a god's orrery. But it doesn't track the motions of any stars or heavenly bodies I'm familiar with."

"An orrery? What's that?" Anusha asked.

"It is... an apparatus that shows the positions and motions of objects in the night sky, usually through clever wheelwork, though I've seen versions, that move through

magical or psionic impetus. But this one... This orrery dwarfs all others I've witnessed or heard tell of. And by the random way the arms of this mechanism rotate, I almost suspect they do not correspond to heavenly shapes at all."

"Mmm," responded Anusha. She'd never spent much time studying the points of light in the night sky, other than to remark from time to time on the beauty of Sehlne's Tears.

"Look at that," Anusha said, pointing. One of the orbs, this one bluish red, wobbled violently. As she watched, her mouth falling open in surprise, three stone arms sprouted from the orb's elaborate harness. The new-birthing stone spans reached outward like plant seedlings nuzzling up from the soil, but far more quickly. As the stone lengths unfurled, a "fruit" swelled and ripened at the end of each, fiery red at first, but cooling even as growth ceased.

Newly minted globes began to rotate around the larger sphere, each on its own connecting arm. One seemed mottled quartz, the other two dull copper.

"What's that?" said Yeva.

Wormlike glyphs crawled across the newborn orbs, then faded to invisibility.

Anusha said, "Writing of some kind?" She turned her gaze from the echoing spectacle to Yeva.

The woman's yellowish skin was noticeably paler. She gave a sharp nod. "I saw it. The glyphs were of a script that seemed familiar, but they faded before I could read them. But I think—"

A screech ripped through the chamber, jerking their attention toward the ceiling.

Three unsupported shapes materialized from the gulf of darkness enshrouding the air overhead. Anusha immediately saw the newcomers were not birds—they were too squat and lacked wings.

As the objects grew closer, they reminded Anusha of fish. They undulated through the air as if swimming. One's

coloration was mottled quartz, and the other two were dull brown... like copper.

Anusha said, "What—"

"Aboleths," whispered Yeva "but not close kin of those I'm familiar with. And these fly." She said the last as an accusation.

Anusha said, "They have the same color as—" Yeva put a finger to her lips and shook her head. She whispered, "We might live if we remain beneath their notice."

Anusha considered reminding the woman they were intangible. They were probably invisible to the approaching creatures. Probably. Of course, she didn't know what abilities an aboleth possessed. Uncertainty made her hold back.

The things spiraled down with languid grace. Their descent stopped when the aboleths reached the newly formed orbs, each choosing the one that most closely matched its own hue.

Gorge tried to rise in her nonexistent throat as she studied the hovering monsters.

A fine haze of mucus hung in the air around their soft, gelatinous skins. They looked half primeval fish, half enormous slugs, with four muscular tentacles sprouting from where pelvic and pectoral fins would have protruded from real fish. Instead of having tail fins, their bodies tapered to slimy, sluglike conclusions.

The two coppery monsters had three eyes that blinked from beneath bony ridges, one below another. The mottled quartz creature had five eyes scattered randomly across its blunt head.

In near unison, the aboleths extruded tooth-studded tongues from lipless, tri-slit mouths. The tongues coiled and rasped across their chosen orbs, bestowing brutal kisses.

Having paid their gruesome respects, the creatures shot upward, moving five or six times as fast as they'd descended and with far greater stability.

When the aboleths were no more than dots high above, Anusha whispered, "What just happened?"

Yeva shook her head, her face slack with worry.

"Up is the way we need to go too. We should follow the aboleths," continued Anusha.

"Follow how?" Yeva gestured at the titanic orrery that dangled unsuspended. Then her face softened. "Ah. We are not bound to the world or its laws, lacking the flesh of our making. I should have learned that when we passed through the wall."

Anusha grinned. "That's right! I haven't tried this before, but I'm sure I can pull it off. You can too, if you concentrate hard enough!"

"So long as you focus on both of us rising upward, it may be possible. Otherwise, you'll leave me behind and I'll gutter out. I don't believe I have an independent existence outside your attention, Anusha."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Anusha. "You know things I don't, so I'm sure you're not a figment of my imagination"

"I didn't say you are imagining me. Just that my consciousness only persists while yours does. You are my anchor."

"Well, we can see if that's true later," Anusha said, shaking her head to clear it of Yeva's implications.

Anusha raised one hand and imagined she held a rope, a rope that ascended to the limit of her sight, but one firmly attached to a support. A length of elven cord dangled down. She gave a few experimental yanks. It seemed solid enough.

She lifted her other hand from the sphere's side, and the faux rope held her. Yeva watched her a moment longer, then reached out and grabbed the rope herself.

Anusha looked up and imagined the rope being winched upward, slowly but surely.

"Here we go," she said, even as their feet lifted away from the great black sphere.

They rose higher. The sphere they'd emerged from was revealed as a colossal obsidian globe whose circumference Anusha couldn't even begin to guess. It was easily as large as a castle.

Anusha and Yeva rose higher in the dim light. From the increasing vantage, it was easy to see that all the stone spans and spheres were one vast mechanism—a mechanism infused with magic enough to grow new components.

As they watched, four new arms sprouted from yet another orb.

"Look, at the edges," Yeva said.

Anusha glanced away from the newest growth to see what Yeva indicated. Three gargantuan metallic hoops circumscribed the entire assembly of large and small spheres. The rings seemed forged of brass or perhaps gold.

Each hoop rotated in place, their edges barely avoiding the four walls that encapsulated the entire incredible device. Or perhaps it wasn't that the hoops rotated, but instead that the glyphs scribed upon them squirmed round and round. The idea made Anusha slightly sick.

She returned her attention to the four newest arms. Each disgorged a globe. One was pale green, another coal black. The last two were a mixture of dark blue and red. Each flashed with a unique line of symbols—

The imagined rope in her hand thinned, and they stopped rising.

"Better concentrate," Yeva said.

Anusha gave a quick nod and envisioned the rope in her hand anew. She strained to feel its solidity and uncompromised connection to the ceiling she hoped was somewhere above.

Their ascent resumed.

"Sorry," Anusha said. "I was thinking—last time we saw the orrery expand, aboleths were drawn to investigate."

"I had the same thought."

Their steady rise finally pierced the indefinite gloom to reveal a flat ceiling. It was apparently composed of the same stone as the distant walls. It also hosted patches of glowing mold. A circular hole pierced the ceiling's center. Brighter illumination streamed through the hole.

"I'm going to take us through," Anusha whispered, pointing at the opening. Yeva nodded.

As they approached, Yeva pointed to a nearby patch of "mold." It wasn't mold—it was a patch of irregular ice.

The same kind of glowing ice she and Yeva had escaped from!

Yeva said, "Apparently the Eldest's memories have condensed out of the ether in more than one place in this putrid city."

"Oh gods," breathed Anusha. They had come close enough that she saw a shape frozen in the ice. A little boy looked back at her with wide, blue eyes.

Then they passed through the opening into a new space damp with a fetid, oily stink.

Aboleths pressed around the hole, leering at them with too many red eyes and reaching tentacles. Anusha swallowed a cry of alarm. Her arm jerked as the imagined rope snapped them another twenty feet upward in only a moment. Her head spun, and she lost her bearings. She kicked her legs, unconsciously looking for purchase, but she did not let go of Yeva or her imagined lifeline.

Nothing immediately attacked. Anusha got control of her breathing. They dangled thirty or so feet below a slick ceiling of rough stone. She turned and stared at the tableau below, trying to make sense of the scene. Aboleths clustered around the hole from which they'd emerged. The creatures huddled in discrete rows radiating away from the circular gap. The rows contained differing numbers of aboleths, one line had just three, another at least twenty.

Most of the aboleths had bluish backsides the color of darkened bruises, with reddish underbellies. Some claimed

distinct colorations from their brethren, and of these, some were noticeably smaller than average, others larger.

All possessed too many red eyes, and all voiced a screeching, chantlike rumble that wove through the air like a swarm of blood-seeking insects. She hadn't heard the sound from below. Had they just started? None of the creatures seemed to be looking up at her or Yeva dangling above them.

Four of the rows convulsed. A ripple of movement pushed four creatures from their perch on the hole's edge.

They dropped, tentacles flailing, like stones into a well, into the orrery chamber.

"Those four—did you see their color?" Yeva said, loudly enough to be heard over the vocalizations. "Green, black, and two blue-red. Like the globes just born below. It means something. The symbols, the colors... I think these beasts are conferring on themselves the power of flight!"

Before Anusha could comment, something moved to her right.

Ari aboleth hovered just ten feet from her and Yeva. It was the mottled quartz one with five eyes they'd seen below, rasping a newborn orb with its toothed tongue. Four of its eyes roved around, searching. But one was focused directly upon Anusha.

The creature loosed a questioning tone like the chirp of a curious crow. Simultaneously, a voice devoid of personality echoed in Anusha's head, Is it of the body? Is it of Xxiphu? Is it benign? Is it a parasite? What is it?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren on the Sea of Fallen Stars

Thoster stood at the wheel watching his crew take Green Siren out to sea. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his stance was one of stern attention. The crew dallied less when the captain's eyes were on them.

But his mind was on Seren. The wizard had always been trouble. He'd just never realized how much. A price on her head, set by Thay itself. He wondered what the amount had grown to.

Not that he was tempted to collect on it himself. Anyone foolish enough to claim a fee from Szass Tam deserved whatever he got. No, he worried about the attention Seren's presence drew to his ship. Attention a whole lot more dangerous than he'd have knowingly risked.

"Course, the damage is already done," he muttered. Morgenthel knew Seren was on GreenSiren, knew Thoster's name, and knew the wizard had protectors. He wondered how closely Morgenthel and Thay were actually entwined. Hopefully, the man was merely a bounty hunter who talked big. Such things were possible.

Were he in Morgenthel's shoes, Thoster would claim more familiarity with Thay's rulers than was strictly true.

Seren was back on deck, checking the integrity of her chalk-scribed circle. The woman seemed intent on continuing her employment with the half-elf. He'd always assumed the woman's desire for gold was purely mercenary. Apparently, she hoped to purchase back her life.

He wondered what it would take to purchase back his own.

"Mtuo'san!" Thoster called to the first mate. A woman with a long silver braid looked up from berating a crew member. "I'm going below. Keep on eye on things."

“Aye, Cap’n!” she said.

Mharsan had stepped into the role of Green Siren’s first mate after the previous one met a bloody end below Gethshemeth’s isle. She was competent, though just as taken with rum as her predecessor.

Thoster walked down the aftcastle stair and saw Raidon. The monk sat propped against the mainmast, his legs crossed and his eyes blank as glass marbles. He didn’t seem actively worried about Seren’s revelation. ‘Course, who could tell with the half-elf? The captain suspected the spellscarred man wasn’t right in the head.

It seemed everyone aboard was damaged in some way. Perhaps Thoster most of all.

He made his way to where their prize slept. The captain’s dog lay outside the cabin. Blackie let no one approach other than himself, Raidon, and Seren.

He patted the dog on the head in return for a lick, then entered Anusha’s cabin. It was the very room Japheth had hid the woman in during their first sea crossing. He chuckled to recall how the warlock hinted at gorgon hearts within to dissuade visitors. Thoster played along with the warlock’s game because it was amusing to do so. At the time, he hadn’t realized what was at stake.

The captain looked down on the woman. She was gaunt and possibly ill. Some sort of enchantment kept her fed and limber, or she’d have died long before. But it was obviously no replacement for the real thing. Even Thoster could see that if she didn’t wake and resume eating and moving soon, she’d die.

“Your mind’s trapped in the relic, eh?” Thoster said, his voice quiet.

The relic. He shook his head. Most days, he tried not to think about it. It was too confusing, and it made his stomach sour. The Dreamheart had more than one claim on him, and until he had it in his own two hands, he’d decided not to choose which he’d satisfy.

That wasn't something he'd advertised to Raidon.

Thoster lowered himself onto the cot next to Anusha's open travel chest. She didn't move, save for her continual shallow breathing. The perfect listener.

"The time to decide is nearly upon me, ain't it?" he asked her. "Maybe what I'll do about the relic does bear thinking on, just a bit, since I have your ear."

The captain produced a pipe and a miniature coal urn from a pocket of his coat. He filled the bowl with a sweetsmelling pinch of tobacco and lit it with an ember. He thought better with a little smoke in the air.

"So, here's where I stand, ghost. First,"—he ticked up one finger—"I told Behroun I'd retrieve the trinket for him. 'Course, that was before I knew what it was. Still, Behroun paid me a good sum, and apart from occasional piracy against merchantmen out of Amn, I count myself an honorable sort. Helps the reputation too." He chuckled.

"Second,"—another finger joined the first—"I told Raidon I was done with Behroun and would help find the relic so we could smash it to flinders. I didn't say those words lightly. Well, not too lightly. I don't want to see monsters raised out of the Sea of Fallen Stars. What sane privateer would?

"Lastly, and most importantly." A third finger. "What of my own need? For all my yarns about my misbegotten sire, I'm beginning to worry. If I claim the relic for myself, I might be able learn the truth about my... condition.

Every year the changes grow worse."

The captain pulled back one coat sleeve to reveal his left forearm. Half the skin had sloughed away, revealing glossy green scales no different from a fish's. It sickened him to look at it, yet he could hardly pull his gaze away. And this was not the largest patch afflicting him. All his self-deprecating jokes paled before the underlying truth.

He'd long delighted in his ability to swim better than others and hold his breath for heart -stopping spans of

time.

That ability had saved him more than once.

Things were different since he'd returned from the cursed isle where the great kraken laired. There, he'd been wet longer than dry. He'd been surrounded by those damned fishy kuo-toa, fighting them, killing them, being bled on by them... and that walking statue! When he saw it, something inside his head trembled, as if on the verge of making some kind of sense!

Thoster blearily recalled falling to his knees in front of the rogue eidolon they'd fought, begging his allies to leave "her" alone. Madness! Why'd he done that?

He couldn't remember. No, that wasn't entirely true. Something had been familiar about that damned shrine. He didn't want to think on it.

The change in his flesh was accelerating. He worried that achieving full understanding might make the change come all the quicker.

"Look at it, will you?" he exclaimed, waving his scaled arm. "When will it stop? Am I becoming a fish-man... a kuo-toa mayhap? Or something with even less of a mind when all's said and done?"

Anusha had no answers. Even were she awake, she couldn't know how he'd come to suffer his curse. It was something he'd not shown anyone else, though he suspected Nogah might have known somehow. He'd never asked her, and now she was dead, taking Thoster's secret with her.

He allowed his coat sleeve to ride back down to his wrist, covering the unsightly blemish. He drew another breath from his pipe. The glow from its bowl glinted in his eyes.

"The way everyone seems to go on about the Dreamheart's power... I wager I could use it to stave off what's ailing me. After that, well, sure, let Raidon break it into a thousand pieces." Thoster puffed, then said, "Course, that's rubbish—ill luck follows me like a cold wind.

The monk's given up chasing the warlock and the Dreamheart. Now we're heading straight into the earth to where the relic was spit up."

He shook his head.

"Which means no one gets it. Behroun can take a long walk off a short pier, eh? Raidon's decided it don't matter anymore, thinks he's got bigger fish to hook. The drug-addled warlock already has it..."

Thoster scratched his chin. "Aye, the warlock's had the orb for quite a spell. And in all that time, he ain't managed to wake you up, poor lass. Either his sorcery is too weak for the job... or your mind ain't actually trapped in it." He stirred the burning leaf shreds in his pipe bowl with a wood splinter.

"Japheth ain't no slouch. I've seen what he's capable of. By now he'd have had you out of the stone if you were in it. Which means... you ain't!"

"So where are you?"

The pirate peered close at Anusha. Then his eyes widened.

"I wonder... I have an idea where your mind's gone. And I'm but a simple man of the sea. If I can figure it, your cloaked protector with his fancy pact can do the same."

The captain stood. He said, "Raidon tells us the relic is part of Xxiphu. I bet ten years' take your mind's drained down to the same place."

He nodded to himself. "I could be whistling past the graveyard, but I bet we find Japheth and his orb when we reach our destination. Ha! Maybe I can borrow the Dreamheart from him then. He won't be expecting us, that's sure."

Thoster inclined his head. "Rare's the person who listens so well without interruption. I might grow to like such a thoughtful companion."

He studied the woman. Despite her sallow countenance, she was still pretty, though a sad sight too. He wondered if

she'd live. It surprised him to discover he hoped she would.

Thoster quit Anusha's cabin, leaving behind the scent of burned tobacco.

Seren's jaw ached. She realized she was gritting her teeth.

The wizard worked her mouth open and shut, imagining her muscles relaxing. She had to let go of the tension, or she would spoil the ritual.

It wasn't that she was surprised bounty hunters yet sniffed after her trail. Others had tried to apprehend Seren over the last several years. A few she had killed in selfdefense, and the others had lost her trail. The last attempt had been four years earlier, well before she shipped out with Green Siren.

And now Dhenna Shavres had let it be known to wizard takers everywhere that Seren was still alive and somewhere on the Sea of Fallen Stars. Why had she trusted that woman? She hoped Morgenthel refused to pay Rose Keep's finder's fee, having failed to capture his quarry.

Not much she could do about that now. Just continue with her own plan, slipshod as it was.

If she could gather enough gold, perhaps the regent would rescind her death warrant...

Part of her knew the undertaking was probably foolish. Szass Tam wasn't known for giving second chances to his foes. Her only hope was that the regent didn't actually consider Seren an enemy or, better yet, even know her name—she was far too insignificant! It was probably a sycophant or lower-level functionary who had put the price on Seren's head. If she could pay that off, plus a hefty bribe on top of the value of the lost treasury, then she might just purchase her life back.

And if she wanted it, perhaps her rightful place in the power structure of Thay...

The hairs on her arms prickled as if a phantom breezed past. Her throat grew tight with apprehension.

There would be opportunity to worry about that later. Now it was time to concentrate on the job at hand.

Seren took a deep breath, expelled it, and began the rite.

She chanted the first stanza of the ritual, mouthing harsh fragments of ancient tongues fused with arcane syllables. Normally she didn't have to understand what she said to perform a ritual penned on a scroll. She just followed the directions provided, no matter how obscure or even obtuse.

This would not be that simple. She repeated the previous stanza with a variation penned in glittering green ink. Her biggest obstacle was the mere fact she'd relearned her entire craft over the last ten years. When the blue fires winked on the horizon, they'd stolen away more than the treasury of Raven's Bluff, they'd also pilfered all her arcane achievements.

Seren began the second stanza, recalling how she'd learned magic anew. Because of her relative youth compared to many established in Mystra's graces, the way of the Weave didn't have too strong a hold over her.

Moreover, before the disaster, many had called her a prodigy. Only a few years beyond her twentieth and she'd already been an up-and-coming Red Wizard. They used to tell stories about her uncanny knack in forging new spells. Everyone expected she'd go far.

After the disaster, Seren had a stark choice. She could abandon the art she'd worked so hard to master, and give in to Thay's wrath, or she could fight back.

While most wizards bemoaned their loss, she found an abandoned laboratory. She didn't give up.

And she'd been rewarded. Arcane mastery was still possible. It merely required a new way of accessing the eldritch currents that yet flowed through the world and beyond.

Morgenthel had nearly ruined it all with his surprise attack.

Seren stuttered as she moved on to the third stanza of the ritual, this one inscribed in ash. She nearly lost control—

A vision of gleaming teeth and claws slashed through her concentration. A creature of savage hunger and chaos!

It bounded toward her, loosing a horrid croak. She cried out.

The image dissolved as quickly as it had formed, only a delusion pulled from the wavering threads of a ritual bent far past its purpose.

Feeling guilty, she wrenched her thoughts for the second time to the rite. If she didn't contemplate the changes she intended, she'd fail. Perhaps spectacularly.

An unaltered performance of the ritual would call a minor dust devil and send it with a message to a distant friend. That was not what she wanted.

She adapted and shaped the ritual even as she performed it, twisting it further and further from its original aim.

The addition of a gleamtail jack as a ritual component was only the first step, though a step on which all the later adaptations depended.

The incantation and physical components were the framework. To it she applied the lever of her will. Her awareness of the ship and the hard planking beneath her sandaled feet dissolved.

Instead of on the ship, it seemed she stood on a savanna of rough stone. A river of lightning cut the plain, blazing white and erratic. Beyond a ridge of basalt raged a lava sea spouting coils of flame. Above her stretched unending volumes of air whose utmost distances were hazed with smoke and mist. Here and there, shells of cloud parted and lances of fiery light blazed forth, emanating from free-floating balls of fire. Like miniature suns, they whirled through the elemental maelstrom.

Seren knew she remained on the deck of Green Siren despite the overwhelming evidence of her eyes, she could still smell the salty sea air and feel the rocking ship's sway. She concentrated on the tiny gleamtail she'd placed at the center of the summoning circle, focusing the power of the ritual through it. Her vision of the tempestuous realm spun and plunged forward as if it were an image contained in a server's crystal sphere.

And there it was—an undulating mass of living gleamtail jacks schooling through shoals of water, stone, air, and fire. From a distance, they looked like ordinary fish—except for the way they swam as easily through air and solid rock, when they chanced upon it, as through liquid.

Colorful boulders studded the ground beneath the school. Their angular shapes tugged at Seren's attention, but she was impatient to complete her ritual, there was no time for sightseeing.

The wizard began the final stanza of the ceremony. She would draw the entire school through to her and magically moor them to Green Siren. They wouldn't survive more than a tenday outside their natural environment, but that would be enough.

Like stars coming out one by one after dusk, points of light appeared around the hull. The gleamtail jacks each harbored a tiny jewel-like glow. The constellation of winking gleams wheeled around the ship, hinting at paths to previously unreachable locations in every glimmer.

Seren finished the closing stanza. When the last syllable resonated in the air, her vision of the echo plane faded.

But not quickly enough. The colorful stones on the edge of the shoal sprang up, revealing themselves as creatures, not scenery. Each left a wake in the air from its surprising acceleration. Some had spears, but all had claws and wide, rubbery mouths generous with teeth.

She blinked, and the echo plane was gone. Green Siren and the Sea of Fallen Stars filled her senses. The ship had

gained a school of glittering stars as an escort... and something else. A tug on her mind signaled that the protective circle was breached! Seren gulped and tried to call out a warning, but her throat was dry from chanting. Nothing emerged but a hoarse whisper.

Five shapes dropped onto the deck from a barely perceptible discontinuity in the air above Green Siren. The one closest to her was a hulking, blue-skinned humanoid larger than an ogre. It had almost no neck and a massive, flat head. Wicked swordlike hooks emerged from the back of its balled fists. It uttered a croaking roar in the wizard's face.

Finding her voice, the wizard screamed, u 'Ware the steeds!"

She backed up, trying to get a mast between her and the blue-scaled horror. Not for the first time she was reminded that sandals, no matter how stylish, were more liability than asset.

The monster reached across the wide space separating them. Its wrist claws caught on but were not entirely stopped by her protective ward. They raked her stomach and face, and the impact flung her backward. A crewman's hammock strung along the railing broke her trajectory, but her head whipped painfully back. She collapsed to the deck, blood oozing from the scratches.

Seren heard more croaking roars and fearful shouts. She pulled herself upright on the railing.

The great blue slaad hadn't pursued her—instead, it was gutting a crewman who'd been standing too close.

Behind them, four other slaads rampaged across Green Siren.

One was red and nearly as big as the blue. Belying its exceptional size, it moved like a cheetah—bunching up, then bounding forward with flippered feet and claws, covering tens of feet across the deck with each stride. It jumped to the edge of the hold and loosed a croak into the

opening so horrid Seren's stomach fluttered. Screams of terror issued from below.

The other three slaads were dull gray and only human sized. One was already chasing a pirate up the rigging, clambering and chuffing like an enraged ape.

"Die, beast!" screamed Captain Thoster, darting suddenly into the fray. He buried his poisonous sword in the breast of one gray slaad.

The slaad shrieked. In a flash of putrid air, it disappeared — only to reappear next to Seren. Blood poured from the wound Thoster had scored. Its electric smell stung her nose.

The wizard cursed the captain and raised her wand. The slaad bled so freely its ichor splattered her face and clothing. But the wound the captain had given it hardly dimmed its fervor. The damned beast eyed her with voracious delight.

She jabbed her wand at it. A pulse of concussive energy thundered from the wand's tip, blasting the slaad in the face. The creature's shriek was lost in the basso echoes and disarray of the broken railing as it was hurled off the ship and into the surrounding sea.

She turned just in time to see another gray muzzle descend upon her, with a wide mouth so large it could encompass her head.

Silky hair slid away from his touch, leaving his fingers tingling. A child's laugh was cut short by a man's death scream.

Raidon startled free from his waking reverie.

Monsters ran amok on Green Siren. Crew jumped overboard to escape the onslaught of vicious teeth and claws.

Only Thoster, bawling orders to his fleeing crew, was putting up any kind of fight. The man engaged a blue-skinned, frog-headed monster, but a red one slipped up

behind the captain even as Raidon grasped the tactical situation.

The monk charged the blue beast, leaving behind regrets and sorrows, if only for the moment. He called out, "Thoster, watch your flank!" not only to warn the captain but to draw the attention of the blue creature away from the overwhelmed man.

As he hoped, the massive beast whirled just as Raidon leaped straight upward. He jerked his right elbow up and connected with the monster's lower jaw. The momentum of the leap combined with the elbow strike snapped the creature's head back, shattered several of its teeth, and turned its roar into a bellow of pain. The sword sheathed on Raidon's back twisted, as if to remind the monk of its presence. The movement threw off Raidon's balance. Instead of kicking away from the creature at the top of his leap, his legs found empty air. He fell at the monster's feet, losing just enough time that one of the creature's flailing hands clipped him. A rivulet of his own blood tickled his leg.

Raidon crabbed backward the moment he fell, away from the monster as it tried to stomp him into paste. He would censure Angul later, when time permitted, for twisting in its sheath at such an inopportune moment. He only had to get a few feet away from the creature to make room...

Raidon rolled up on his shoulders. At the very moment he started rolling back, he jackknifed his legs down to the deck, flipping himself back to his feet. He came face to face with the blue. The monk raised his arms and snaked them to either side of the creature's massive head. Its head was too big for him to trap it, so he made do by gripping big handfuls of the creature's puffy throat sac.

He yanked out and down with all his strength.

The monster's fierce bellow warbled into a plaintive whistle. Raidon disengaged as it slapped its hands up to plug the wounds beneath its chin. While it was distracted, he bent one leg into his chest as if compressing a spring,

then kicked straight out. The heel of his foot smashed into the creature's knee. The crack of breaking bone ricocheted down the deck.

The beast convulsed and dropped sideways like a felled pine. Planking splintered beneath its weight.

Raidon took a moment to scan the deck as his foe twitched. Thoster remained upright, trading blows with another monster—the red one. He didn't see Seren anywhere, but a shimmering school of gleamtail jacks swam like stars in a life-size astrolabe around the boat. That was encouraging. But he worried at Seren's apparent absence.

A couple of the crew, more doughty than their fellows hiding in the rigging, pulled themselves up from below deck, daggers, axes, and scimitars in hand.

Another slaad leaped down at Raidon, so quickly it didn't seem to occupy any of the space between where it started and ended its charge. A handy trick! Apparently it was tired of chasing crew around the mainmast. This one's skin was gray and its size was equal to the monk's. It locked eyes with Raidon. Something in its gaze sparkled, and it leaped at him.

The world blinked. He found himself hanging unsupported over the open hatch to the hold. Crewmen on the ladder to one side gaped at him.

Unprepared for the fall, he still managed to utilize the first-year lesson of Xiang Temple, a skill monks were taught before nearly any other: how to fall.

Raidon tucked into a spin and slapped onto his back at the hold's bottom, taking the impact of the descent so perfectly that despite falling an incredible distance, he hardly felt a thing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Leaving Darroch Castle, Feywild

Mapathious swept a sword of fire through reality, opening a rent as if cutting through tissue paper. Beyond was a tunnel walled in whirling vapor, shadow, and half-seen silhouettes. A constant roar like a waterfall's poured from it. The spinning hollow extended to the vanishing point. The tunnel promised a turbulent passage.

In its other hand, Mapathious clutched an iron chain from which dangled a rune-scribed bell. The bell's weight would have staggered any lesser being of the same size. But Mapathious was an angel of exploration. In pursuit of its task, strength more potent than its frame pumped from its heart and swept through its semidivine limbs.

The bell was ensorcelled to protect those within it from the ravages of travel in dangerous climes. Mapathious disdained the need for such protections. It preferred to explore alone, swooping into unfamiliar territory as a solitary scout, then reporting back to shining commanders. Were foes massed in ambush? Did demon lords ride forth? Was there truly an adamantine fortress lying across the path, and who had the power to build it in a tenday? These were the kinds of quests the angel usually accepted.

Thus, it gave fleeting consideration to dropping the trek bell into Avernus as a way to forcibly demonstrate its objection to the enterprise. The travelers would be treated to the unique vision of red smoke streaming past their view port in the floor as they plummeted toward a desert pocked with lava seas and iron cities. Even if the enchantment of the trek bell preserved its passengers from the fall, Avernus's residents would soon be upon them. But Mapathious was bound to preserve the bell and serve the one who had summoned him. So it would essay this journey

with passengers in tow and not drop them into the Nine Hells.

In truth, once its destination was described, the angel was intrigued. Though loath to admit it, the angel might well have embarked on the journey even without being sworn to find Xxiphu. The angel's nature was to locate, to travel, and to explore. Never before had it visited a city of aboleths, let alone the oldest one in the world.

The mere description of an ancient aboleth city hidden deep in the world's mantle wasn't enough direction for even an angel of exploration. But Mapathious had a guide. It wore an iron ring. Wound around the ring was a strand of dark hair—the hair of a human female whose spirit the angel of exploration could dimly feel through the connection.

It wondered, as it lowered the trek bell into the tornadic passage between space and dimensional walls, what relationship Xxiphu had with another place it had recently heard rumor of. A place called the Citadel of the Outer Void. It hoped no relationship whatever.

Then it was in the roaring passage, surfing the discontinuities of unraveled planes and stretched reality. All its conjectures burned away. Its entire concentration was turned to survival.

Japheth rearranged himself on a curved bench that ran along the bell's interior edge. The surface was wide, padded with dark brown leather, and rose to a comfortable backrest that even included neck support. A very cozy seat, if it weren't for the floor. Because there didn't seem to be one.

The trek bell's interior was divided by a straight metallic wall. He claimed one side, and the Lord of Bats occupied the other.

The warlock had considered asking Neifion to remove the partition. He worried the Lord of Bats might get up to no

good, unsupervised. Then he imagined himself and the insidious creature sitting across from each other on a journey of who knew how long. The silence. Those red eyes filled with hate. The veiled threats.

No, he was happy to let the Lords of Bats keep to himself. Japheth would have to trust that the oath of alliance Neifion had sworn would prevent fatal mischief.

The warlock's gaze fell to what would have been the floor in any normal conveyance. However, just like normal, far smaller bells, the trek bell had no floor. As with each previous glance, he blanched as his gaze fell into the snaky, howling tunnel. It was like looking down a tornado's throat, he imagined.

Instead of the earsplitting scream he imagined such a violent scene would generate, he heard only a low, constant roar. The noise was somehow muted by the trek bell, he supposed.

Over this narrow abyss, Japheth's boots dangled. A quiver passed up his spine as he imagined what might happen if the trek bell jolted, knocking him off his seat. Was that possible? Handles on the wall offered at least a semblance of security. He grabbed one. He took a breath and leaned farther over the bench's side.

The cavity walled in swirling mist seemed to stretch down to infinity. It reminded him of something. He didn't have to think long, of course. It was like the terminus of the crimson road, toward which addicts to traveler's dust trudged*Japheth had learned the crimson road was more than metaphor.

He sat back and closed his eyes. His fear of the vortex beneath his feet lost its impact in comparison. He wondered, idly, what it would look like after a pinch of dust in each eye.

No.

Not yet, anyhow. He decided to have a bite to eat to distract himself. He produced a pack from the folds of his

cloak, the one he'd liberated from Darroch Castle before they'd embarked. He opened it—

“By Caiphon!” he exclaimed as something inside shuddered and shifted. He overrode his instinct to toss the pack into the chasm.

A creature chittered and pulled itself forth—a tiny wrinkled man, one of Neifion's homunculi. It had stowed away inside the voluminous pack.

Once free of the pack it stood, no more than two feet tall, and regarded Japheth expectantly, as if awaiting its next command.

“What... Why did you hide yourself inside this pack, creature?”

The homunculus made high-pitched noises, from which Japheth could only pick out broken word fragments. It pointed at the partition, where the Lord of Bats resided.

“Neifion told you to do it?”

The creature nodded. Japheth snarled. Was the Lord of Bats spying on him? “You take your direction from me, beast, no longer Neifion. I—”

The creature leaped at Japheth. It fastened its mouth on his neck. Pain lanced through him. A bitter stench wafted from the wound.

Japheth seized the homunculus's scruff and tried to pull it away. The creature held to him like a leech, biting and scratching. His fingers tingled with sudden numbness. The bitter smell was poison!

“Assassin, let go your master!” Japheth boomed. Almost without conscious direction, the Lord of Bats's cloak plucked him out of the trek bell. A mere blink of darkness and he was back inside the vehicle, three feet from his former position.

Even as the homunculus was still turning around to find its relocated target, Japheth backhanded it with a tingling arm. The homunculus dropped through the bottom of the bell trailing a forlorn wail.

“That answers one question,” he muttered. It was possible to fall out of the trek bell.

Japheth grabbed a handle and leaned to watch the homunculus’s progress. Its flailing form dropped two or three long seconds before the twisting wall of vapor bowed inward. When the creature struck the wall, it was instantly pulled out of sight. Gone.

The tingling in Japheth’s fingers progressed to his arms. The damned thing had bitten him deep enough to get some of its spittle into his blood. It was a familiar feeling. When Japheth first took control of Neifion’s domain, a few of the homunculi had bitten him. This one hadn’t got enough venom in him for the tingling to lead to numbness and trouble breathing. He’d be fine.

Far more troubling was what the attack portended. It was more than coincidence that a homunculus would attack Japheth now. Its old master was just across the bulkhead. He wondered if Neifion had sensed the conflict and was even now laughing at the warlock’s discomfiture.

His thoughts veered wildly. He was fooling himself that he had any control over the unfolding situation. All his many worries ganged up and pounced as one. The concern leading the pack: Anusha’s welfare. Was she even still alive?

And if she was alive, would she ever deign to speak with him again?

It was all too much! His hands moved of their own accord. They plucked the silver compact of traveler’s dust from a fold in his cloak. Internal conflict died before it was half begun as he dropped a red crystal into his right eye.

A scarlet curtain washed across his vision.

His roaring thoughts drowned, one by one, beneath an oceanic feeling of oneness.

“Better,” he mumbled. What had he been so worked up about?

Anusha, of course. She was on his mind nearly constantly. Her face, her hair, the way she used to smile, the faint hint

of her perfume, and her pale skin...

She'd become an obsession, perhaps one nearly as powerful as the traveler's dust. He smiled as crimson currents rocked him.

Safely on the road, he allowed himself to wonder how she regarded him. Their last interaction, when he'd pulled her spirit briefly free of its captivity, suggested the infatuation she'd first shown for him had seen its day.

A vacancy in his chest made itself known.

It was the oddest feeling. A sucking, forlorn sensation of anticipated loss. His breath came harsher for a moment. He wondered if anguish over pending rejection was an emotion fit for a curse-spewing warlock whose powers could pierce the very walls of the world.

Apparently, yes.

His dust-hazed mind tried to spin him away from the pain, but his surroundings were too novel to completely ignore. He directed his gaze back into the vortex. He imagined all his worry being sucked down that roaring throat, leaving him free to act without emotional attachment.

He was on his way to save a woman who had trusted him. A woman who, if events would pause long enough, he might forge a bond with that could last a lifetime. He could mentally deny it all he liked, list all the reasons why it could never be, but his body had already decided.

He loved her. "Anusha," he called, his voice taking on an odd timbre that reverberated through the bell, through his dust - charged mind, and out into the swirling space between spaces. "Anusha, I'm coming to set you free."

The yellow aboleth repeated, What is it?

Anusha hissed in surprise. The yellow monster could speak! More than that, speak from its mind into hers.

She'd heard stories of such marvels. The words seemed to crawl around her brain before each one became intelligible. The sensation sickened her.

The many eyes of the aboleth pulsed. Then all five looked at her.

The insidious voice continued, Is it a stray dream, a failed memory jarred loose from the Elder's wakening?

Unknown. Disperse it, lest it rise to the apex and disrupt the ritual of rousing. Nothing must disrupt the ritual of rousing.

The aboleth's "speech" was harsh and odd. It didn't seem to have a sense of its own identity...

Something like a cobweb seemed to brush Anusha's face. It tickled, then fell away.

"The aboleth has noticed us," Yeva said.

"Yes."

"Can you get us away?" Yeva asked, her voice calm as glass.

Anusha followed the woman's suggestion. She and Yeva jerked backward, directly away from the beast.

The voice called after them, no softer or louder than before and just as devoid of identity, It resists dispersion. It ignores the aura of catching. Dispatch sleepers to eat it. Dispatch dreamcatchers to clutch it Summon overseers to enslave it.

Anusha blinked and everything was different. Instead of Yeva and a threatening aboleth, she saw a roiling tornado of infinite length. Something descended that whirling tunnel—a bell being lowered by a fire-winged angel.

"Anusha!" came Yeva's voice, as loud as if she were right next to Anusha. "We must retreat!"

Anusha blinked free of the vision even as a message issued from the strange, hollow bell. It was a promise.

"Anusha, I'm coming to set you free."

Reality reasserted itself. But her concentration on the rope metaphor holding them in midair collapsed. She and Yeva fell like stones.

Their residual trajectory carried them well clear of the aboleths gathered around the orrery hole. They fell and

sprawled onto rough stone. Anusha was on her feet a moment later—uninjured, of course. She helped up Yeva, who was shaking.

Yeva said, “I am unhurt!” The woman was still getting used to her lack of a physical body.

The yellow aboleth with its multiple eyes that could apparently see them swooped down. A cacophony of clicks and low, whalelike moans burst from the mass of aboleths around the circular hole in the floor, but apparently whatever they were doing was more important than chasing down loose memories. They continued their strange ritual.

“Look,” said Yeva. She pointed. A school of aboleths fell off the ceiling like a throng of leeches abandoning a corpse. They thrashed in the naked air but didn’t fall to the floor. Instead they swarmed for a moment, as if relishing their ability to defy gravity.

It is here. It is vulnerable. Destroy it!

As one, the aboleth school surged toward the yellow-hued aboleth, whose eyes remained fixed on the women.

“Run!” Anusha shouted. She still had Yeva’s hand from helping her stand. She sprinted toward the opposite wall of the great chamber, pulling Yeva along.

The five-eyed aboleth continued to descend, but its angle of descent changed to follow their path across the chamber’s floor. The others fell in behind the lead creature, creating an undulating line in the air like a yellow-headed snake.

Yeva yanked her fingers free of Anusha’s grip.

Anusha yelled, “What are you doing?”

Yeva extended both hands, fingers flared, and leaned toward the approaching aboleth phalanx. Her eyes pulsed with energy—one with fire, the other with leaping sparks. She said, “I think only the yellow one can sense us. If I can hurt it.. “ Lightning discharged from Yeva’s hands and unerringly speared the lead aboleth. Even as the creature’s

path through the air faltered, Yeva cupped her palms, reared back, and threw. An orb of translucent gray arced upward. It struck the yellow aboleth. White light pulsed from it, briefly enveloping the creature's body.

The five-eyed aboleth made rasping, clicking shrieks as it dropped out of the air and slammed into the floor.

The aboleths still flying lost their formation and began to dart erratically like mosquitoes searching for prey.

The yellow aboleth smoked, but continued to scrabble for its bearings. The watcher was hurt, but still alive. Not for long, Anusha vowed.

She charged the floundering yellow thing. Her greatsword rematerialized in one hand, shining with the golden light of her desire. One of the creature's wildly searching eyes noticed her at the last moment. The bulk shifted, and Anusha's attack only grazed the creature instead of swiping directly through its blunt head.

The contact was enough to send it into a screaming fit of flailing tentacles, none of which could grasp Anusha.

As her fear drained away, she grinned, waded forward, and plunged the blade carefully down, this time directly into the beast's brain.

It is a threat to the Sovereignty, came the insidious voice, now strained and trailing away, but just as emotionless. But its mind is vulnerable. Watchers can see it, and overseers can catch it. It must not interfere with the rousing...

The yellow thing's mental voice ceased. It shuddered once and stopped moving.

Anusha looked up. All of the creatures flitting around above ignored her.

Anusha swung around and raised her sword to salute Yeva.

Yeva was kneeling on the ground, one hand reaching toward Anusha. She was steaming. Dissolving!

Anusha dashed back to her companion, allowing her sword to fade so she could throw both hands around Yeva.

The moment they touched, Yeva sighed, and her image returned to solidity.

Yeva said, "I summoned the storm's lance with psionic will. Apparently to my detriment."

Anusha nodded. It made her stomach convulse to realize Yeva's existence was so tenuous. But she said, "You were incredible! They would have got us if you hadn't knocked the watcher out of the air with your magic."

Yeva allowed herself a social smile at Anusha's words.

She said, "Psionics, not magic. Just like the mental powers you harness, I believe."

"Right," said Anusha, not certain she agreed, but unwilling to gainsay the woman who obviously knew something of the mind's functions. And really, did it matter what the source of their abilities was, so long as they worked?

"We need to find the exit," said Anusha. "Something terrible is going on here. Some sort of rousing. The yellow one was afraid we might interfere. All I want to do is leave. I don't think we want to be here when whatever the Elder is wakes up."

Yeva climbed to her feet, accepting Anusha's help again. Then she pointed, concern widening her eyes.

The swarm of flitting aboleths over the yellow corpse had moved toward the two women while they talked. One aboleth, a gray-green specimen with more tentacles than the others, hovered only twenty feet away, its three crimson eyes scanning.

Anusha clapped a hand over her mouth, then leaned to Yeva's ear. She whispered, "Even if they can't see us, they can hear us. We need to move!"

The women retreated toward a massive opening in the chamber's far wall. They walked rapidly, but quietly. The swarm didn't follow, though the gray-green one surged forward to land only a few feet from where they'd last

stood, slapping its damp tentacles around as if hoping to flush out invisible prey.

The opening in the wall wasn't so much a tunnel mouth as an elongation of the chamber, one that began a shallow turn up and to the left like the bottom end of a tightly wound, but thick, hollow coil.

They left behind the aboleth ritual chamber poised over the alien orrery.

A mucous light suffused everything. The rocky floor, walls, and even ceiling were thick with eroded protuberances like granite obelisks worn down to nubs only two or three feet tall, though others reached five or six times that height. Here and there, icy stretches of condensed memory clung to the corridor in ragged patches. Anusha and Yeva gave those a wide berth as they ascended the sloping, gradual curve. Shallow pockets were common in the massive passage, creating hollows some ten feet on a side. Some were empty and dry. Others contained residual slime stinking of rotten fish. Most, however, were filled with a syrupy mass of fluid in which the shape of an unmoving aboleth lay ensheathed.

"Many monsters sleep here, but they are waking," said Yeva. She pointed to an empty but slime-slicked hollow.

Anusha nodded, distracted. Her eyes constantly scanned for an exit. Would she know it if she saw one?

Also, she was conscious of a new sensation.

She turned to Yeva. "Do you feel that? A kind of... I can't quite describe it. A current? As if we're walking in a shallow stream in the direction it's flowing?"

Yeva cocked her head. "Now that you say it... Yes. It is a psychic undertow."

"What's that?"

Yeva shrugged. "It is a force akin to what allows lodestones to draw iron filaments, I suppose. But what we're feeling draws minds."

“Wouldn’t the psychic attraction be in the opposite direction, from where we escaped the expanse of frozen dreams?” asked Anusha. “I thought that was where my mind had refocused. If this ‘undertow’ leads away from the ice, maybe we should allow it to sweep us up? Maybe it’ll tumble us out of this nightmare!”

Yeva gave her a doubtful, sidelong glance and said, “I would advise against trying that. Of course, you’re right, up to a point. For centuries, stray dreams were swept up and apparently lodged within the expanse we escaped.

However, if the Eldest is waking, then its mind is reintegrating. Which means stray dreams and lost spirits may be falling directly to it now. Whereupon they will be consumed—gone forever.”

Anusha’s skin prickled, even though she knew full well she had no physical form.

She swallowed and said, “Then let’s resist it.”

“Agreed.”

“Yeva, I just remembered something... When the yellow aboleth tried to snare me with its mind, it triggered some kind of vision. I saw a friend of mine traveling downward. I heard his voice. He said... he said he was coming to rescue me.”

Yeva cocked a brow. “Are you sure it was a true vision?”

“No. I can’t be sure, but it seemed real.” The woman shrugged. “Is there any reason to believe your friend—What is his name?”

“Japheth.”

“Japheth! All right, does Japheth have the means to come to our aid?”

“Actually, yes. He knows spells and swore a pact to an archfey who grants him many odd abilities.”

Yeva said, “Hmm. Perhaps your vision is a true one. He swore a pact, you say? I’ve heard tell of such things.”

Anusha nodded. “And he has a cloak that’s bigger on the inside than out. I don’t really understand how it works.”

For the first time, Yeva actually seemed encouraged. "Perhaps he could devise a new body for me... if he's truly on his way."

"Let's act as if he is," Anusha said. "Which is another reason to find an entrance—so we can meet him."

"Either way, our immediate goal is the same," said Yeva.

The women renewed their upward slog. The vast tunnel, roughly tubelike, continued its gradual rise. They wound their way around putrid aboleth burrows and pillars.

A churning, bubbling sound drew their attention. They turned in time to witness a previously sleeping aboleth surge from its hollow, spraying goo in a wide radius. It lay on the floor for several moments, its sides heaving and its tentacles writhing.

"Should I kill it with my sword?" Anusha whispered.

"Let's see what it does. It's not yellow."

The aboleth finally rolled onto its stomach. Its tongue rasped out of its tri-slit mouth and tasted the floor. Then it began to move. Half primeval fish, half enormous slug, the creature skated forward on a bed of mucus, up the shallow spiral.

Anusha got her stomach under control. She whispered, "All right, we'll follow it."

Yeva said, "Not that we have any other way to go."

It was true enough. But Anusha hoped there was more to this city of Xxiphu than a long coil of aboleth- hollowed tunnel from bottom to top. There must be an exit. How else could the creatures come and go? They paced the aboleth, keeping about a city block's worth of distance between them and it. The creature slid forward like a snail moving nightmarishly fast. Sometimes it paused to touch a tentacle against a protruding obelisk. When it did, purple light flared at the obelisk's tip. Then the aboleth continued, leaving behind a flamelike flicker of purple.

Anusha said, "I wonder what it's doing."

“Perhaps it is setting lights to encourage its still sleeping siblings to wake and join it.”

Anusha grimaced. “What else can you tell me about Xxiphu and the Eldest? You seem to know a lot about this place.”

“I am not of Faerun, or even Toril. I come from a higher realm where knowledge of ancient things is not wholly forgotten. But even so, Xxiphu is an obscure topic. I know only what I once read in a crumbling scroll during a brief visit to the House of Knowledge.”

Anusha had never heard of the House of Knowledge. She glanced forward to make certain their furtive conversation wasn’t being noted by the aboleth. So far, so good. She said, “What did the scroll say?”

“I was searching dusty lore to learn more about illithids, not aboleths. Still, it caught in my memory, for its oddness. Written in Deep Speech, the scroll proclaimed an Abolethic Sovereignty once attempted to rule your world but was foiled. The text described a colossal thing sleeping in darkness. A nasty, terrible, many-handed, and manyeyed monster. The passage indicated its massive bulk was the result of great age. It never ceased growing, inch by inch, year by year, and century by century. Even millennium by millennium.”

“The scroll was describing the Eldest?”

“Just so.”

“How old can it be?” Anusha asked.

“It was old when Sehine cried her glittering tears. Its mind buzzed with a thousand languages when mortals on Toril puzzled out their first expressive grunts. No offense. When it fell into slumber, the world yet rang with the clamor of the primordials’ forge hammers. Or so claimed the document.”

Anusha prompted, “What did the scroll say about Xxiphu?”

“It claimed Xxiphu’s murky and echoing crevices sheltered creatures who worshiped the Eldest as their supreme monarch and divine provider. The scroll described these creatures that teemed Xxiphu as lesser, younger manifestations of the Eldest’s quintessential form. They are the Eldest’s progeny. Aboleths, of course. The document wrapped up with a warning—the entire vastness of Xxiphu is a city, but also simultaneously a precious seed the Eldest has brooded through the ages “

“Ugh. A seed? What does that mean?”

“No further explanations were written. I suspect it means that one day the Eldest and all its ancient aboleth children will wake from long slumber.”

“I think that day has arrived,” Anusha said.

The aboleth they followed paused at an intersection. The tunnel split, becoming two lesser paths.

One would have been a continuation of their way, but its character changed drastically. The passage constricted to a third or less in diameter. The mucous light persisted, allowing Anusha to see forward into a twisted, winding maze of irregular tunnels. Attached here and there on naked rock quivered masses of white orbs, gelatinous and pale like fish eggs. That way reeked of brine.

“A nursery,” murmured Yeva.

The other passage was a perfectly circular cavity some few tens of feet in diameter. Like a bore hole, it was smoothwalled and plunged sideways. The passage didn’t go far before it ended in a wavering curtain of mist.

The aboleth lit one last obelisk protrusion with purple fire, then slid its bulk into the twisting maze Yeva called the nursery.

Anusha shook her head. “I’d rather not go into the egg tunnels.”

“Agreed.”

They proceeded down the smooth bore hole to the barrier. The watery light caressed Anusha’s armor with

images of blue-green bubbles. She raised a hand and pressed it into the mist. She didn't feel the least resistance, nor did it feel wet. She retracted her hand. It wasn't any the worse for wear, but...

"I guess that doesn't prove anything," she said. "I can walk through walls as easily as mist."

"Let us go together." Yeva took Anusha's free hand.

They stepped through the barrier.

Anusha saw a massive subterranean vault lit by thousands of tiny purple flames. The air was close, humid, and uncomfortably hot. She was glad she didn't really need to breathe.

They stood on a balcony with a low curb like a halfhearted attempt at a railing. She craned her head and looked around. She saw then the balcony was a tiny part of a far larger structure, one that descended in a clifflike drop below and extended an equally great distance above... it was hard to estimate distances, but certainly many hundreds upon hundreds of feet. The vast space wasn't large enough to hold the object on which they stood—its lower foundations plunged into the cavern's floor, and its heights were clutched within the belly of the cavern's irregular ceiling.

"Look," said Yeva. She leaned far out, pointing down along the face. Anusha obeyed and saw that great patterns were carved on the age-worn exterior of the obelisk, depicting thousands of interconnected images she couldn't quite comprehend. Her stomach flipped when some of the inscriptions flowed and changed their shape even as she watched.

Anusha leaned out farther to get a better look, and an odd sensation fluttered through her. Odd because she'd missed it for so long—it was the feeling she had right before waking back in her body!

But the impression was different, more drawn out. And... the mental current, the psychic undertow as Yeva called it,

swelled. The sound of it roared in her ears. Its fervor threatened to yank her from her feet. She was waking, and as she did so, she began to fall upward into the current. Toward the Eldest.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Darroch Castle, Feywild

Winkled men and women the size of toddlers padded through the shadowed castle. Some dusted wainscoting, others polished trophy cases. A few shooed bats from crevices and high ceiling corners.

In the grand study, a lone homunculus looked for droppings behind furnishings, paintings, sculptures, and other of oddities on display. The wrinkled man reached the tall, finely crafted wooden cabinet with a glass face. The little creature had always been fascinated, in his dim way, with this particular piece. Behind the circular face, various wheels moved according to principles the homunculus had no chance of appreciating, but he liked to watch the wheels move all the same. The creature reached out to touch the glass with a craggy finger.

He sighed and let his hand fall to his side. Then he noticed something odd.

He cocked his head, looking with consternation at the wooden cabinet. Despite the candles burning in the chandelier above, the cabinet threw a shadow into the room as if a bonfire raged behind it. The homunculus saw no such light.

The shadow lengthened and deepened, and from its depths stepped the outline of a mastiff. Its coat was shadow given form and girth. The homunculus prepared to screech but paused when he noticed more figures coming through.

A slender-limbed woman glided through next, a creature of poise and pearl white skin, with eyes like the night.

The homunculus immediately recognized her as a fey invader, an intruder from beyond the cavern that contained Darroch Castle.

In their wake stumbled a human. For all his noble's clothing and polished boots, the man was young, overweight, and disheveled.

No more creatures seemed forthcoming. The wrinkled man opened his mouth to scream an alarm, but he managed only a single squeak before the shadow mastiff got him.

Lord Behroun Marhana gasped and rubbed his hands, trying to get some feeling back into them. He'd accompanied Malyanna to the Lord of Bats's domicile down a shifting corridor of shadow once before. If anything, it was colder this time.

Behroun wrinkled his nose as the hound crunched on the tough flesh of a limp humanoid figure the size of a child. He said, "I don't think the Lord of Bats will appreciate your pet eating his servants."

The eladrin noble glanced at him, spearing him with her disconcerting regard. "He has more than he needs. And he so loves making more. He merely requires suitable root stock*She held his gaze, as if leaving something unsaid.

"I guess." Behroun was already out of his depth. The more he tried to assert his own independence, the more Malyanna proved he was nothing but a pawn. His fear of her was equaled only by his hate, impotent as it was. Had it been his idea or hers to free Neifion from his never-ending feast so the Lord of Bats could lead them to Japheth?

Neither—it was a mutual decision, he told himself. The idea of releasing the archfey from Japheth's curse scared Behroun, but it was either that or destroy the pact stone.

Malyanna was tired of waiting. And really, so was he.

Malyanna told her hound, "Stay, Tamur." The beast continued to chew, not deigning to look up at its mistress.

The eladrin noble made her way to the stairs. Behroun followed, happy to leave the sound of crunching bones behind.

They ascended to the balcony. The door to the feasting chamber was open. Malyanna swept inside.

Behroun rushed forward and saw the table. It was laid out with a smorgasbord of tempting repasts. But the chair at the table's head was empty.

"Neifion!" called the eladrin, her voice loud as a blizzard's howl. "Come out and receive your visitors!"

No answer.

Malyanna stalked to Neifion's empty chair. She bent and looked beneath the golden cloth, then whirled to examine the chamber's periphery. The Lord of Bats was not napping in a corner or roosting on the ceiling.

Behroun doubted Neifion was lying curled up inside the credenza along the wall.

Then again... He walked over and threw open the low cabinet doors. Silver dishware nestled within in tidy stacks. Behroun released his breath, relieved he hadn't come face to face with the pale man curled up like a spider in too small a hole.

"How could he have..." Behroun trailed off, then he fumbled for the amulet around his neck. Had the creature somehow managed to retrieve Japheth's pact stone?

He worked the secret clasp. The amulet's star iron halves snapped open, revealing an emerald. The pact stone was whole.

Malyanna narrowed her eyes, taking in the unharmed green stone in Behroun's hands. She said, "So he's managed to free himself... or some other agency freed him."

"Or something found and killed him, trapped as he was."

"No," mused Malyanna. "Use your eyes. There is no sign of struggle here or in the outer chamber. Our crafty Lord of Bats managed to find a way free of the table without shedding any of his own precious blood. He is loose once more."

"But without his full power," Behroun added. "While the pact stone remains whole, Neifion has only a shadow of his

strength.”

“Hmm.”

Behroun could almost see contingencies tumbling through her mind. But the woman’s eyes blinked too rarely, and their blank expanse unsettled him. He looked away and said, “Perhaps he left the castle to go look for you, his one ally?”

“Doubtful.” She sneered. “More likely he yet skulks in Darroch’s shadowed halls, relishing his freedom and planning his next deceit.”

Behroun glanced at the open door to the grand study. He said, “Let’s go find him, then! He’s our only link to Japheth. Although with just the two of us to search this place, it could take days.”

The woman caught him with her terrible eyes, a look of disbelief on her face. Disbelief at his stupidity, most likely.

He forced out his next few words anyway. “Perhaps we could sneak into the kingdom that exiled you. You said it was near here. You must still have a few secret partisans. If we could enlist their aid—”

The eladrin noble’s peals of laughter overwhelmed his fumbling words.

She said, “Have you forgotten my pet? I’m sure Tamur can sniff out Neifion if we put him on the scent.”

“Oh, of course I hadn’t forgotten...” he lied.

Trying to salvage some shred of dignity, Behroun said, “But your kingdom, where you were queen before your exile... I think it might be a good idea for us to collect a few of your supporters—”

“You,” she said, putting a finger on Behroun’s chest and giving him a slight push, “number among the mostly easily led mortals of any I’ve duped. There is no ‘kingdom.’ ”

“What? What do you mean?” Behroun, despite suspecting more and more the eladrin was playing him, was shocked all the same now that the game was over. A rarely seen

smile on Malyanna's face grew even wider with amused disdain.

"However, I am an exile of a sort."

"You are?" he said.

"Yes. And I do have allies, mortal. They await me within the Citadel of the Outer Void, coiled and eager for my call. For them, no time has passed since I left. They await the Key of Stars, the single most wondrous artifact to fall to the world from beyond the sky. But-as I said, I am exiled through a cruel accident of fate. I cannot reach the Key of Stars—Or even enter the Citadel, for it is sealed. I have been locked outside its pillared halls for millennia."

She looked at him as if wondering what reaction her introduction of so many alien names and senseless statements would have.

He couldn't help it. His face flushed hot with angry, helpless confusion. What in the name of Imphras Heltharn was she talking about?

The lengthening silence finally made him choke out, "Citadel of the Outer Void? I've never heard of it, nor of a star key. If this citadel is your true allegiance, why lie to me about it? What are you really up to?"

"Until the Feywild fell back into step with the world, I was a priestess without an altar, a proselytizer without an audience. But no longer!" Her eyes trailed faint lines of mist as she began to pace.

She continued, "I keep alive the old faith. The few in the world who tried to do so were imprisoned as traitors.

But I was free, despite being cut off from the living arbiters of my creed..." She whirled around, watching a scene in her imagination that brought awe to her normally haughty features.

"The Citadel is a place of power and change that lies just past the outermost edge of Faerie where time itself hardly reaches. Sealed, it will only open to the Eldest. But the Eldest sleeps in the world. For years uncounted, Faerie was

cut off from the world. I could not reach the Eldest, nor could it reach the Citadel. I lived long without hope one would ever find the other.”

She sighed, then said in a voice nearly as loud as a shout, “That’s all changed! The Eldest can be roused, oh yes.

He can enter the Citadel. He is destined to take the Key of Stars and unlock the Far Manifold...” Her voice trailed off.

Behroun said, “... I don’t—”

“And I,” said Malyanna, “am destined to be fate’s handmaiden in all this. It is my due for waiting centuries without end so patiently. That’s why I need the Dreamheart. That’s why I needed you.”

“And still need me, right?”

She whirled and pierced him with her flaring, cold eyes. Behroun saw his own breath begin to steam under her chill scrutiny.

“You still need me! My agent Japheth has the Dreamheart even now,” he reminded her. He tried to distract her with another question. “But why do you want it at all?”

“I grow tired of waiting, at long last. The Dreamheart is a piece of the Eldest. If the Eldest will not rouse, as he has failed to do so many times before, I will use the Dreamheart to open the Citadel myself. If the Eldest will not find the Key of Stars, I will locate it myself in the Eldest’s place!”

Behroun stepped away from the crazed woman. His body wanted to bolt. His mind knew there was no place he could run where Malyanna could not find him.

As if reading his mind, the eladrin noble snapped her fingers and shouted, “Tamur!”

Behroun looked to the entrance, then yelped as a shadow behind the credenza widened, producing the shadow hound.

“Where is Neifion?” she purred at the overgrown dog. “Is the Lord of Bats still in Castle Darroch?”

The dog raised its nose and sniffed. Then it lowered its head and gave a whispery bay that went through Behroun like ice. The dog raced out of the chamber, nose to the ground.

"For your sake, let's hope Tamur finds his quarry." Malyanna brushed past him, following her pet from the feasting chamber.

Behroun looked at the table of succulent delights. The wedges of triple cream cheese at the very edge made his mouth water. He wondered if he wouldn't be better off cramming a piece in his mouth instead of following Malyanna. "Probably," he muttered.

He checked for the dagger at his belt, squared his shoulders, and walked away from the table.

Behroun wandered the shadowed halls of Darroch Castle, steering clear of the furtive movements of the wrinkled men. The air was cold, and silence lay heavy on his ears. Tiny candles flickered from chandeliers and wall sconces, providing pools of light only bright enough to make the shadows press all the closer.

He wondered if Malyanna had returned to the world without him. The thought worried and relieved him in equal measure. The eladrin noble seemed to be skating closer and closer to outright madness—madness only quenchable by blood. Of course if she did leave him behind, eventually Neifion would return to find Behroun trespassing. Free of his never-ending feast, the Lord of Bats might decide to punish Behroun for failing to break the pact stone when Neifion first demanded.

A scream of rage echoed through the castle. This was followed quickly by what sounded like crockery being smashed.

"She's still here." He sighed.

Behroun traced the sound to a tapestried corridor thick with cloying mildew and side chambers heaped with

enigmatic shapes under pale sheets. An open door halfway down the hall bled light and the occasional sound of something being smashed.

Lord Marhana walked into a high chamber saturated with musty odors. Bulky objects cluttered the room, their identities cloaked by oilskin tarps. Tamur stood at the chamber's far end sniffing around a set of four wooden blocks. By the indentations left in the blocks, something massive had rested on them until recently.

Malyanna floated near the great hound in a cloud of swirling air. Tatters of oilcloth spun around in the cold wind. Detritus sprinkled the floor beneath her feet: a broken granite statue of a two-headed snake, the shards of a vase that must have sported an elaborate diagram, and a litter of broken glass of many hues whose original profile Behroun couldn't guess.

The eladrin noble saw him. She screamed, "He's gone!" Her glare encompassed him and found him wanting.

She floated to Behroun, alighting just feet away, and held out her hand. "Give me the pact stone. It's time to break it."

"What will that accomplish?" Behroun tried to keep a quaver from his voice. His left hand moved to cup the amulet hanging on his chest. His right hand inched toward his dagger.

"Neifion is currently unavailable to lead us to Japheth. But we can follow the mystic residue of the pact stone's destruction to the Lord of Bats," asserted the eladrin. "Tamur can track more than scent." She thrust her palm forward. "So stop dallying, human. Give me the stone. Now!"

"Very well." He sighed. He knew that whatever happened next, his life was probably over.

Behroun lifted the amulet from his neck and held it over his head like an offering. As Malyanna's eyes followed the movement, he slipped the dagger from its sheath with his other hand..

Then he bent forward and extended his knife arm as if he were punching. The dagger stuck the eladrin in the stomach.

She screamed and backhanded him. His head snapped to the side as something broke in his face. His cheekbone?

Everything was whirling around and ringing. He didn't think he was standing upright any longer. The shock of the blow began to fade, but burning agony crept in to replace it.

He blinked away the spinning grayness trying to smother him. Lord Marhana saw he was lying on his side several feet from where he'd knifed Malyanna. The woman remained standing, but blood ran in a thin rivulet from where the knife still protruded.

The shadow hound snarled and slunk toward Behroun.

"I said 'hold,' Tamur," said the eladrin, her voice strained for the first time he could recall. "You can feast on his entrails later. After he's opened his precious locket."

Good, thought Behroun. I hurt her at least. More than most can probably claim.

The woman gripped his amulet in one hand. She must have taken it from him while he'd lain stunned. How long had he been out? Long enough for her to figure out she couldn't open the star iron locket without help. Behroun realized, as he should have before he'd put a knife in Malyanna, that its function was his last bargaining chip.

The eladrin pulled the knife out of her belly. She screamed words in a language so foul it nearly knocked Behroun unconscious again. The blood came thick and red now, and Malyanna staggered.

Then the flow slowed to a trickle before stopping altogether. Strength returned to the woman with every heartbeat. Though her clothing remained stained and rent, Behroun knew the ancient creature enjoyed some damnable ability to heal herself.

She saw he was watching and laughed. "You don't think I've survived all these years by deceit alone, do you?"

She shook her head and walked to where he lay.

Malyanna tossed the knife aside, bent, and put the amulet in his splayed hand. "Now," she directed. "Open it.

Each moment you delay, I remove a finger."

"I'll open it," he rasped. "But only if you swear on your citadel... the Citadel of the Outer Void!"

"You're in no position to make demands." She grabbed a pinkie finger and bent it backward. He gritted his teeth, but a scream escaped him when the finger snapped.

"If you swear," he continued, his voice breathy now, "I'll open the amulet right now."

"Swear what?" she purred as she took hold of his index finger.

"That neither you, nor your hound, nor any servant you command will harm me afterward!"

She growled like an animal herself, then broke the finger she grasped.

He screamed louder this time. The sound seemed to relax the eladrin. She heaved him to his feet and leaned him against a tarp-covered contraption.

"Very well, mortal," said Malyanna. "For the sake of our past alliance, despite how many times you've disappointed me, I'll let you be. If you open this damned contraption now."

"Swear it," he insisted, his voice a whisper.

She collapsed her forearm across his throat so that his breath and blood were cut off for a moment—just long enough for him to panic. Then she released him, smiling. She said, "I vow as a priestess of the Citadel of the Outer Void, as a devotee of the Abolethic Sovereignty, that neither I nor any who serve me will harm you for a period of no less than one year, if you open the amulet right now."

Behroun sagged. He pulled the amulet close and tried to work its secret catch. The pain and awkwardness from the

two protruding fingers of his left hand got in the way. He failed once, then twice, to open it.

“Are you stalling?” purred the eladrin.

Behroun gave a strangled sob and tried again. The third time proved the charm. The halves of the locket popped open. The emerald-hued pact stone lay exposed.

Malyanna plucked it from Behroun’s hand. She held the stone up to her eye for a moment, squinting at it with her inscrutable, lambent gaze.

Then she tossed it on the floor. The green jewel winked fitfully in the dim light.

Malyanna pointed a finger. A pale, cold ray emerged and transfixing the pact stone.

The emerald shattered. A flying fragment drew a red line on Malyanna’s cheek, but she only laughed.

Even Behroun was able to see the breaking stone discharge a tiny spark, but dark and shaped like... a bat.

The mote fluttered above the ruined stone for an instant, then dived away from the room in a direction that didn’t exist in Castle Darroch.

“After it, Tamur!” screeched the eladrin noble.

The great hound barked once and dashed down a lane of shadow Behroun hadn’t noticed earlier. Malyanna said, “Until next year, then,” and followed her pet into the shadow between dimensions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren on the Sea of Fallen Stars

The gray slaad tried to bite off Seren's head.

She barked out her most potent ward. Even as the thing's teeth grazed her temples, radiance burst from her. The force of the concussive spell chipped the slaad's teeth and flipped it up and backward several feet. The creature tried to get its balance but fell on its back.

Before the slaad could rise, Seren snapped her fingers, bidding the called creature to return to whence it came.

Neither the slaad clambering to its feet before her nor any of its brethren so much as paused, let alone disappeared in a puff of released summoning magic. She scowled. The pack of hunters had exploited the gap left by her summoning ritual. She couldn't dismiss them because she hadn't called them.

All she could do was kill them or be killed.

Shouts and screams from other parts of the ship grazed her ears. Larger slaads than this gray were ravaging, but—

The creature leaped at her once more, its rubbery face contorted with elemental hunger and fury. At least it was now leaking ichor.

She spoke the opening stanza of Sunless Winter. A blast of chill blue spread from her open mouth, crystallizing from the arcane syllables.

Ice rasped the slaad's hide like sandpaper. It shrieked, but fixed her with its pale gaze. Frost stung her flesh, froze her in place, and sucked the breath from her lungs. How... ?

The damned beast had turned a portion of the spell back on her!

She started to utter another spell, knowing the creature was going to reach her before she finished.

Someone stepped between her and the charging slaad. Raidon!

The gray, intent on rending her from neck to navel, was oblivious. The half-elf leaned into the creature's charge and grabbed its arm. Using the creature's own momentum, he flipped the creature over his hip. The gray slaad cleared Seren by a foot. It crashed down behind her. The monk followed his quarry.

She turned and finished her spell, sending a concussive bolt of thunder through its body. It convulsed, paying no attention as Raidon leaned down, cradled the creature's head between his arms, and squeezed.

The gray's eyes bulged as its breath stopped. A few moments later, it lolled, dead or unconscious. Either way, it was out of the fight.

The chill of her redirected spell released its clutch. Seren rubbed her hands together and blew on them. Tiny pins stuck her extremities as hints of feeling returned.

Two slaads remained, a gray and a red. Thoster and a few of his crew had formed a defensive line on the forecastle. With axes, sabers, scimitars, and the captain's clicking sword, it seemed Green Siren might actually turn the tide.

The red slaad was on the forecastle stairs, face to face with the captain. Thoster bore several deep claw wounds down the left side of his face and chest. He grinned as if he was having the time of his life.

Raidon took the stairs on the forecastle three at a time. His last step was a leap that put his foot into the small of the red's back. The monster stumbled under the blow. Thoster advanced a half step and pushed his sword into the creature's chest. It croaked, a sound charged with supernatural terror.

The crew, Thoster, and even Raidon paused in the face of the fearful sound, giving the monster the space it required to bounce straight up. It caught the mainmast crossbeam high over its head.

Seren was close enough to hit it with another volley of thunder. The red, still croaking, managed to retain its grip on the crossbeam. It swung itself in a great arc away from the ship and dived. Before it hit the water, it winked out of existence. Seren saw the telltale gleam of an arcane translocation.

The last gray tried to flee like its larger cousin, but it was not quite so resilient to Seren's spells. She caged it in a field of flickering fire, one specifically designed to anchor creatures in space. The captain, the monk, and the rest of the crew made short work of it, and its life was spilled out in stinking streaks of green and red.

Silence stretched into the aftermath for several heartbeats.

A tumult of voices went up as the crew checked to see who had survived the onslaught. A few called for a victory party.

Captain Thoster roared, "Secure the ship! What're you doing standing around jawing? Make sure there ain't more overgrown frogs hopping around down in the hold. Get this mess shipshape and see to the wounded. Then we celebrate. Tonight, triple rum rations!"

Men and women scattered to do Thoster's bidding, their fear and concern washed away by the captain's promise.

Seren wondered at the promise of rum, if it was so potent, perhaps she should avail herself of some too.

"And call the healer," demanded the captain. He held his rent shirt close around his chest as if to hide the extent of the wounds down his torso.

A fellow crawled up from the hold with a pouch. From it he produced a vial. "Restorative, sir," he said. "We're running low, I'm afraid. This is the last." Thoster took it and glanced at Seren and Raidon. "Each of us should take one swig. We should be at the top of our game before we begin the expedition." The captain handed the vial to the monk.

Raidon nodded and took a small sip. The wizard wasn't certain she could detect any change in the man.

When the vial passed to her, she took a large mouthful. Like ice water on a blazing day, the fluid cooled her mouth and throat. Scrapes, pulls, and pains she hadn't even realized she bore faded.

Captain Thoster finished the last of the fizzing blue liquid. The most serious cut, the one running down his face from his left eye to under his jawbone, slowly faded, leaving behind only the faintest of white lines to mark it.

"Seren," said the captain, as he dropped the empty vial. "What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

She pushed away her thoughts of the slaad and sighed. "I warned you other things out of the Elemental Chaos might slip through when I summoned the gleamtails."

She raised her hand in a wide showman's gesture. Like stars over the world that had lost their way, myriad points of light swirled around the ship. Each one was a fishlike creature of the Chaos. Each gleamed its own hue, and among them some shone emerald, sapphire, and amethyst.

Seren continued, "And knowing that, I warned you both to be ready. The way I see it, events occurred as I predicted. Except now that I think on it, I didn't see either of you on deck as I finished the ritual. Perhaps if you'd been around, we could have prevented the creatures from crossing over in the first place."

Thoster's brow furrowed in thought.

"Seren," said Raidon as he watched the crew attend to the needs of the ship and the wounded.

"Yes?"

"Now that the gleamtails are here, how do we proceed?" His eyes, black as the depths of the sea, turned their regard on her.

She wasn't ready to move on. "And where were you when I finished my ritual? You're the reason we're putting ourselves at such risk."

Raidon replied, "You're right, Seren. Please forgive me. My thoughts were elsewhere. I hope my lapse didn't cause you any lasting harm." He didn't look away as he spoke.

Seren had expected some sort of excuse or defense. She was put off by the simple apology. This one saw the world differently than most, that was certain. She wasn't sure she liked it. Maybe he thought his example would move her to apologize for not disclosing her time with the Red Wizards.

"Well," broke in Thoster, "I wasn't on deck because I have a ship to run. I guess I figured your warning was more for form than anything else. From now on, Seren, if you say jump, I'll ask how high."

Seren felt her mouth quirk toward a smile. The captain had that effect on her sometimes. Her defensive anger began to drain.

The captain continued, "What say we give this expedition a day before we start? I could—"

Raidon said, "Thoster, time is precious. We must find Xxiphu. We must quell what is likely waking even as we speak."

The sword on Raidon's back shifted, giving voice to a low, whispery tone, as if agreeing with its master.

The captain's grin dissolved.

"Xxiphu won't wait for us," said the monk.

Thoster raised one hand in a placatory gesture. His other still held the rents of his clawed garments closed.

"Hold on! I ain't backing out. I just want to give everyone a chance to be at their best. Me especially."

Raidon said, "Now is the time. We should begin our journey down." He nodded up at the gleamtails swarming around the ship's periphery. "Are we ready?"

Seren took a deep breath. Though the slaads' attack had rattled her, they hadn't disrupted the ritual. The gleamtails were present and keyed to Green Siren. Thanks to her.

She nodded. "Yes, we're ready. The magic is set. It should last a tenday at minimum. And you're right—the sooner we

start, the longer the trip we can make. It wouldn't do for the school to break up while we're still below. The ship and all aboard would be crushed to flinders quicker than it takes to describe."

Raidon said, "That's a risk I am willing to take."

Thoster made a choking sound. Seren frowned.

She wondered if the half-elf had a death wish. Being crushed was not a risk she was willing to take. Which was why she'd modified the ritual even more than she'd described to Raidon. If the gleamtail jack school broke up prematurely, Seren had the option of bodily returning with them to the Chaos. Not the safest escape hatch, but far superior to staying behind in a ship suddenly unprotected from the weight of a continent.

She cleared her throat and motioned to Raidon. "Stand here in the center of the circle, where I've marked. This is the focus of the ritual. From here you can direct the school."

"Anyone can command the gleamtails?" wondered Thoster.

She swept her hand to include herself, Raidon, and the captain and said, "I've crafted the rite so any one of us can control the route the school swims, so long as we stand in the circle. It's as simple as thinking of a direction.

The school should respond "

The monk looked to Captain Thoster. "Are you ready?"

The captain stroked his chin a moment but nodded. He said, "We were ready to depart before. Same holds true now, despite that we lost a few good crew."

Raidon entered the circle scribed on the deck. His brow creased. The gleaming creatures surrounding Green Siren startled, but remained in the spherical pattern around the ship. The monk's head dipped.

The deck creaked. Some of the crew cried out as the Sea of Fallen Stars sucked the ship beneath the waves.

Water swirled up around the schooling gleamtail jacks, pressing its damp weight against the swirling, silvery forms that somehow sealed out the sea. Watery light replaced the sun, painting sails, wood, cloth, and flesh all the same shade of bottle green.

"It works," breathed Thoster. He grinned. "Imagine what I could do with these fish, coming up on an Amnian merchantman from below! I'd be the terror of the Inner Sea!"

Seren ignored the captain and watched Raidon.

The half-elf pressed an open palm on his chest, on his glimmering tattoo. The lines of the stylized tree burst into a heatless blue flame. She took a measured pace back. The color was the hue that still visited her in nightmares. The Year of Blue Fire yet scarred the dreams of every wizard who lived through it, even those who lost only their magic. She took a second step away. Seren decided putting even more distance between herself and the fiery display wasn't unreasonable.

But the color wasn't quite the same blue throughout. At the flame's core burned a fiercer, more empyreal hue.

She supposed this was the power of the Cerulean Sign the monk spoke about so reverently.

The light slanting through the water above dimmed further. They were still descending, so smoothly Seren could scarcely detect the movement in the soles of her sandals. She walked to the railing and leaned out, trying to perceive where the protective field of air ended and the water began.

The boundary was smooth enough, but full of ripples, like the surface of a lake stocked with jumping trout.

Skating just above the water, the gleamtails swirled and sparkled, beholden to the edicts of her ritual. She studied the fish and their patterns, looking for any sign of weakness in the binding magic. She'd told the monk the protective

shroud of gleamtails would last about a tenday. She was pretty sure that was true, give or take a day or two.

She heard Raidon speak, his voice strangely hollow. "I can sense the direction of Xxiphu. Its taint is strong, even though it lies buried miles below water and earth."

Seren saw shadows had grown and pooled across the deck. It was noticeably cooler too. But Raidon's Sign burned torch bright, illuminating his features from below.

Fearful faces of loitering crew were shades just on the edge of visibility.

The captain bawled, "Get back to your duties, you lazy dogs! And light the lamps! It'll be full dark soon enough, and you stand like savages around a fire while the cold dark claims Green Siren. Now, mover."

The crew dispersed into the work. The captain moved closer to Raidon. In the inconstant light of the monk's burning scar, Seren saw the captain had relaxed his death grip on his rent clothing. She saw his chest and stomach. In the strange light it almost seemed, just for a moment, that green and yellow scales covered the man in rough patches like some sort of odd piscine leprosy. Seren blinked away the odd hallucination and returned her attention to the gleamtails.

Raidon held his place in the circle. The planking trembled with the energy of the wizard's ritual, communicating its presence by touch. The circle's influence flowed from the deck into him, tingling at first, but leaving in its wake a feeling of... something larger than himself. While his body stood in the circle, he sensed a newly forged link to a second body, a phantom form whose shape was that of a great sphere. A sphere whose surface was forged by schooling creatures plucked from the Elemental Chaos.

With hardly more effort or forethought than it took to move his own limbs, he propelled the sphere down through

the darkening waters. And Green Siren plunged farther and farther into the cold depths of the sea.

Raidon shook free from the illusion, though not completely. He thought it unwise to risk losing contact with the ritual, but he wanted to keep tabs on the ship and the protective globe with his own eyes. The hollow in which the ship rode remained perfectly intact. The tiny gleamtail tailfins worked tirelessly. Whatever property allowed the creatures to swim the variable landscapes of the Chaos was being lent to the ship and crew.

"I ain't never seen the like," murmured Captain Thoster. Raidon didn't start at the comment, even though he had failed to notice the man standing so close, just beyond the edge of the ritual circle.

"How do you suppose the little monsters are keeping the air fresh enough for my crew?"

Raidon said, "Ask Seren, Captain. I have to concentrate, or I'll lose the way."

Thoster grunted and moved off, muttering that he should check the rum supply.

Raidon promptly dismissed the captain from his awareness. What he'd said was true. It was proving difficult to simultaneously direct the gleamtail-shrouded Green Siren while also following the guidance of the Cerulean Sign. With his hand upon the symbol, he could faintly sense the direction in which Xxiphu lay. But the more he focused on that guidance, the less he was able to feel the phantom shape of the protective sphere he steered. He had to juggle both perceptions in his mind, moving back and forth between them quickly enough that he wouldn't quite lose hold of either.

Raidon's straight-line dive toward the sea floor shallowed until Green Siren's trajectory angled west and down in equal measure. A couple of times Raidon noticed other aquatic creatures nearby. Some were nearly as large as the

encapsulated ship, but all moved quickly away from the plunging vessel.

Finally they approached the sea floor. He sensed it as a slightly denser plain of substance, but really no different from the water above it, at least from the perspective of a gleamtail jack.

Green Siren plunged into it. Keel-first, the ship burrowed downward.

The silt and stone parted as if they were nothing more than filmy veils.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR), Xxiphu

Anusha's feet lost contact with the balcony. Someone was screaming. She realized it was herself. Terror ruled her.

Her thoughts loosened and evaporated like dew in the morning sun. Anusha's form too, starting with the golden armor, began to unravel into a mist of nothing.

A hand found hers and squeezed. Anusha grasped back with desperate strength. It was an instinctual response, her identity was peeling away, and—with it—reason. Horrified, she was aware of each memory as it smoked up and away toward a waking monstrosity hungry for minds.

Yeva jerked her down, off the balcony and once more into the slimed tunnels of brooding Xxiphu.

The moment she passed the threshold, Anusha's dream form solidified. She gasped, "Tin Anusha!" She'd nearly forgotten. Yeva dragged her another twenty or so paces down the tunnel, away from the balcony exit.

Moisture filled Anusha's eyes. Dream tears, anyhow, as understanding washed over her at how narrowly she'd just escaped her end. She'd almost awakened from her dream. But the focus of her mind was now centered on the Eldest instead of her physical body or even the center of the orrery below. Waking would entail her mind and soul being eaten by and incorporated into an ancient horror. She'd have been consumed, gone forever.

Her situation was unbelievable. She was still alive, but how was she going to escape? Anusha couldn't leave the cursed city. If she did, she would start to wake up again. She couldn't stay either. Sooner or later one of the aboleths capable of seeing her would find her. Or the Eldest would fully rouse and call her to itself in an instant.

"I'm doomed," she whispered from where she lay on the tunnel floor.

Yeva shrugged and said, "We're all doomed. Some of us just struggle at the end of fate's thread longer and harder than others before it is yanked. Beyond that, eternal nonexistence is everyone's destiny."

Anusha shook her head, gazing out through the false hope the tunnel exit offered. "I don't think that's true."

Yeva said, "What else, then?"

"When we die, we go to a better place." The yellow-hued woman said, "Many things are possible."

Anusha nearly screamed. "But I'll be denied finding that out if the godsdamned monster on top of this godsdamned city eats my soul!"

Yeva blinked, then said, "True. The same holds true for me. If your mind falters, my mind dies too. I haven't even the hope of a body to return to. A moment ago, before I pulled you back, I faded too."

Anusha wanted to throw herself down and give up. Or run in a random direction screaming away her concerns and sanity in a blind panic. If her fate was death, it would be so much easier to get it over with.

A deeper, dispassionate part of her knew she wouldn't do any of those things. There was no one to surrender to.

That same, stark knowing reminded Anusha that giving in to fright was guaranteed not to lead to a happy outcome. She wouldn't consciously betray herself so. And it wouldn't be dignified!

She half smiled at herself and felt better for it. She said, "Thank you for pulling me back, Yeva. You did save me. Sorry to fall apart like this."

"I reacted very the same earlier, remember? You calmed me. I'm glad to return the favor."

Anusha replied, "Maybe I should—"

Something fiery and swift passed the balcony, sweeping highlights of orange and yellow illumination down the tunnel. Anusha had the distinct impression the object she'd glimpsed possessed wings of molten fire.

Mapathious drew near the end of its journey and, with it, the term of its current contract. The unstable passage it traveled, composed of briefly unraveled planes and stretched reality, began to fray. The ring on the angel's finger pointed to a great cavity in the earth. The hollow vault was many miles deeper than any other subterranean passage it had ever visited. Mapathious was intrigued.

The angel sheathed its sword. The interdimensional tunnel collapsed. Mapathious flashed into the cavern whose lower third was filled with an ancient sea. An obelisk was caught in the space like a spike hammered askew. A frieze writhed on the age-worn exterior. The inscriptions shifted and changed even as Mapathious drew closer. The angel recognized the style to be similar to those of its order, and it nearly dropped its burden in realization. Its earlier fear was prophetic.

This was a fragment of the Citadel of the Outer Void. A fragment lying below the world like a seed waiting to germinate. By the way the exterior images crawled as if half alive, the angel guessed the seed was sprouting.

The ring guiding Mapathious's exploration vibrated with proximity. She to whom it was connected lay within one of the balcony-like cavities along the obelisk's side. The angel altered its course.

It would drop the trek bell upon that very balcony. That would conclude the terms of the expedition. Then it would flee back to the higher domains, where it would warn its order of Xxiphu's existence.

Mapathious passed the balcony once, bleeding off velocity with its wings open wide. As it circled back to drop the bell on the narrow ledge on the obelisk's vast face, something emerged from the ancient sea far below.

Something big, with too many arms by far.

The curved interior of the bell tilted and bucked without warning. Japheth clutched for a handle but banged his hand instead. A massive jolt threw him off the bench. The warlock's vision skewed sideways, and his head rapped against something unyielding. Stars exploded and his body went limp. He fell out of the opening in the bottom of the trek bell.

Smears of white light resolved, showing that he lay on a stone balcony. He was grateful not to be falling through a planar vortex.

A crash and a thump pulled his head to the left. The bell he'd been riding in was fetched up against a stone archway. Cracked pieces of the arch rained down. An odd luminescence glowed in the passage beyond the arch, though the trek bell obscured half of the opening.

A recent dose of traveler's dust yet hazed Japheth's perceptions. Plus his head rang with pain from his violent introduction to the floor. He tried to piece together the events that led to him lying limp and dazed there, wherever "there" was...

A shout jerked Japheth's attention in the opposite direction. The warlock saw that if he'd landed a few feet more to his right, he'd have fallen off the balcony into a vast cavern partly drowned in water black as tar. Nausea added its own sickly note to the pain in his head and the blurred confusion from his drug. A light flared below, and with it another shout, this one a cry of challenge. Japheth saw a creature with burning wings and sword.

"The angel of exploration," he breathed. It all came back to him. Anusha, the Lord of Bats, the journey via the trek bell down to Xxiphu... That must be where I am now, he thought. Japheth struggled to his hands and knees to get a better vantage on Mapathious.

The angel's wings worked frantically, but something held it in place. Its sword fell again and again on a length of black tentacle that reached up from the darkness of the

ancient waters. Tracing the tentacle down to its source, he saw that it emerged from a nest of at least a dozen more slithering arms reaching upward. Hideous eyes glared upward too.

“Gethshemeth!” hissed the warlock. Japheth knew with drugged certainty what and who the creature was holding the angel. It was the great kraken from whom he’d stolen the Dreamheart. The Dreamheart that lay nestled somewhere within his cloak’s extra dimensions.

Japheth rolled away from the edge, hoping the great kraken was too far away and so distracted by the angel that it hadn’t noticed him. The warlock briefly considered helping Mapathious with a curse or two but thought better of it. He’d have to expend power to descend to the level of the fight. Gethshemeth had nearly won the last time Japheth faced it, and he’d had the aid of several more allies then. Japheth was in Xxiphu to save somebody, but it wasn’t the angel.

He frowned. He realized the angel had the ring he needed—

Anguish pierced Japheth, a pain so pure that at first he didn’t recognize it as soul -shredding torment. He convulsed on the stone balcony as something tore away from him, something part of him for so long he’d forgotten it belonged to another.

A shadowy figure burst from Japheth’s skin, tearing his flesh as it left. It hovered over the quivering warlock a moment, an indistinct silhouette with night-dark wings. Though tearing pain threatened to obliterate his reason, he knew the traveler’s dust pulsing in his blood allowed him to see the image. The figure represented the power he’d taken from the Lord of Bats. That power, and more.

Japheth’s deal with the fey creature he’d discovered in the dusty tomes of Candlekeep was concluded.

“My pact stone!” Someone had shattered it. He could guess the sniveling worm who’d broken it. “Behroun, I’ll

have your skin as a curtain," he hissed through his pain.

Except... he knew the threat was idle. His loss wasn't merely of the extra power he'd seized from his patron. The hovering shape represented all his powers, every spell, and even the minor abilities he used for simple conjuration. It was all gone.

He was no longer a warlock. He was just a man. A man who'd made several powerful enemies. A man who was stranded in a hideously perilous aboleth lair. A man with only a little time left to bemoan his fate.

The shape above him flashed away as if fired from a bow. It pierced the trek bell's iron side like a ghost, into the half where Neifion traveled.

A scream burst from the conveyance, overpowering and jubilant. The cry didn't subside, instead, it swelled, sending a crack shivering through the trek bell's iron walls. Neifion was reclaiming all that Japheth had taken.

The discordant noise raised the hair on Japheth's nape and arms. In that howl of victory was a promise. Neifion had made it often enough from his chair set before the Feast Never Ending.

Would the Lord of Bats craft a homunculus from Japheth's corpse?

The image of such a transfiguration broke through his loss and the traveler's dust. Japheth rolled onto his knees, gritting his teeth against complaining muscles. Sweat broke on his brow. He heaved himself to his feet.

The sideways bell vibrated like a cage restraining a rabid wolverine. He could see into the bell from its wideopen bottom, but the side Neifion had claimed was obscured by a haze like hundreds of flapping leathery wings. At any moment the Lord of Bats would emerge, without pacts or oaths to restrain him. He'd appear in the full flush of his strength...

"No," mused Japheth, anot all his strength." He still wore Neifion's lesser skin.

The Lord of Bats's freedom shriek redoubled in volume. The trek bell exploded like a hobgoblin's wall -breaker mortar. The shock wave punched Japheth into the waiting folds of his cloak, and he was gone.

"What was that?" Anusha said. She craned her head to look down the tunnel toward the balcony. The molten-winged creature she'd glimpsed was gone. "I saw a light," said Yeva.

"It had wings. I think it carried something. It went by the balcony too quickly for me to tell."

Yeva took a step closer to the exit, then paused. "Are you sure it wasn't an aboleth?"

"It wasn't an aboleth," Anusha replied. "Well, I only saw it a moment. I guess it could have been."

"Let's go," Yeva decided.

Then the fiery light returned. This time Anusha clearly saw a manlike figure with wings of fire. It brandished a flaming sword in one hand. In the other was a ridiculously large temple bell.

The creature's enormous wings thundered as it lowered the bell onto the balcony. Yeva grabbed Anusha's arm and tried to pull her down the corridor. "We need to get back," she whispered.

"No, wait!" Something about the bell was familiar.

The odor of rotting fish hit Anusha. A tentacle wide as a tower squirmed over the balcony. Its black length entwined the fiery-winged humanoid, who cried out in surprise. The tentacle yanked, and the creature was snatched out of sight.

The bell fell freely a silent instant until it smashed onto the balcony, bounced onto its side, and caromed across the floor.

Yeva hauled Anusha back with surprising strength. A boom hammered the air.

Despite Yeva's insistence, Anusha's eyes remained locked on the exit. "Look," she said. "The bell is near the arch."

Yeva let go of Anusha's arm. The woman's face lost some of its agitation. She said, "It doesn't look like something the aboleths made. Maybe you're right, Anusha. Let's take a closer look."

Anusha nodded.

A scream burst from the bell caught in the tunnel mouth. The iron shell vibrated with... fury? No, exultation.

"Nor does that sound like an aboleth," said Yeva, her voice raised over the ecstatic bellow.

Anusha nodded. What was it about the bell that tugged at her memories? Something that should have been obvious to her. Had the Eldest stolen away her memory of why the bell was familiar?

The ecstatic call didn't fade after several moments—it swelled.

They both flinched when a dozen splintering lines cracked across the bell's face.

Bats poured from the fissures like smoke. The iron object burst apart like a peeled fruit, revealing a creature Anusha had last seen sitting at a table in Castle Darroch.

"Oh no," Anusha said.

When she'd seen Neifion in the castle, he'd been harmless, trapped, and quiescent. Now he was transformed. An aura of needle-toothed bats veiled him. He seemed physically larger, and muscle visibly rippled beneath his formal black clothing. The scream of demented joy emerging from him had just burst an iron vessel. If it hadn't already, the noise would draw the attention of every lesser aboleth already roused from slumber.

A pocket of nothing opened only paces from Anusha, and a man stepped through. His eyes were red as a demon's—or as the eyes of someone walking the crimson road.

"Japheth!" Anusha gasped.

“I found you,” he replied. A sad smile brushed his lips. He swayed, then fell unconscious at her feet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR), Xxiphu

"Stay back, Anusha!" Yeva said. "It could be an aboleth trick."

Anusha shrugged off Yeva's restraining grip and leaned down to look at the unconscious man.

It was definitely Japheth, though he didn't look healthy.

"Disguise seems too subtle for the creatures we've found here," Anusha said.

"Well, that's true," Yeva said.

"This is Japheth, the one who sent me a vision!"

"Ah. Well. Of course. Who else would he be? And who's the screamer back there?"

"A wicked creature called the Lord of Bats who's probably trying to kill Japheth. Let's get out of here."

The Lord of Bats's scream ceased. They had only moments before Neifion took stock of his surroundings and saw, if not Anusha and Yeva's dream forms, then at least the all-toocorporeal warlock lying in the moist corridor. Yeva was no help carrying the unconscious man. Her hands passed right through him. After a few heartbeats of fumbling, she gave up in disgust.

Thankfully Anusha found Japheth's weight bearable, if she maintained concentration. She pulled him up and across her armored shoulders. They moved down the corridor, and Anusha tried not to drop the lolling Japheth on his head. Yeva hurried in the lead, saying she would make sure the way was clear.

The Lord of Bats did not notice the furtive figures moving away down the slimy tunnel. He concluded his victory scream with a hearty laugh, simultaneously sinister and booming. Anusha supposed he reveled in the return of his autonomy.

With any luck, Neifion would draw local attention. Maybe a clutch of aboleths would descend upon the Lord of Bats, catching him before he readjusted to the return of his power, and that would be that.

Anusha reached the tunnel fork where Yeva waited.

Yeva eyed Japheth, then glanced back along the way they'd just come.

"Is he following us?" Anusha asked.

"I don't see a Lord of Bats or anything else. The tunnel's clear as far as I can see."

"Good." Anusha shifted Japheth's bulk slightly on her shoulders. His weight was becoming easier to bear the longer she held him.

"Which way?" said Yeva. "Back toward the orrery, or into the egg tunnels?"

The larger obelisk-studded passage descended in wide loops to the orrery. That chamber hosted too many aboleths for comfort, some of which could see Anusha. Even those that couldn't see her would certainly notice an unconscious human floating in midair.

The other passage narrowed precipitously before splitting into a snake's nest of twisted, winding tunnels.

Quivering masses of white jelly dotted the rock walls, each containing a handful of pale orbs the size of a human head. A few of the white blobs were much larger, easily twice the size of a man. The obelisks of the larger corridor continued into the smaller maze of tunnels, though only one tunnel seemed lit with candlelike purple flames.

Anusha made up her mind. "This way," she murmured. She pushed up the slight grade leading into the egg tunnels. Though upward was closer to the Eldest, she hoped they could find a niche or some sort of aboleth version of a closet to shelter in prior to reaching the city's apex. Japheth needed tending. If they could wake him, maybe he could deliver them from Xxiphu in one fell swoop.

The rotting, salty smell redoubled as they plunged into the sinuous maze. Anusha took the first tunnel whose obelisks didn't burn with purplish radiance. The aboleth they'd seen earlier lighting the obelisks had gone a different route. Anusha hoped the branching tunnels without light contained no roused monsters.

The passage looped up and around in a wild curve. The regularity of its width suggested it wasn't quite a natural tunnel, but the chaotic way it wound around argued the other way. It didn't take long for the purple light to fail, leaving only the mucous green glow that seemed a feature of Xxiphu's air.

Every so often another tunnel split off, spiraling away on a separate egg-smeared path. She wondered just how many eggs were stuffed into the reeking corridors.

Anusha tried to track their course by taking every leftbranching corridor. Unfortunately, not all the passages diverged to the left or right—some dropped straight down, others led up, and several settled on some angle in between. Perhaps she should have asked Yeva to blaze a trail so they could retrace their steps? Maybe that was what the aboleth had been doing with its purple flames.

"Stop," she called. She was second-guessing how many left branches they'd taken.

The warlock groaned.

"Is he awake?" Yeva said.

Anusha carefully slid Japheth to the floor. The man appeared to be waking from his deep slumber.

"Japheth? How are you?" Anusha said.

Blinking was about all he could manage, but at least he was conscious.

Seeing him so defenseless and confused made her throat ache in a way she was unprepared for. He was the reason she was trapped here. But now... she was the reason he was here too. He'd been looking for her. How he'd managed to find her—what struggles and obstacles he must have

overcome to reach her side—she couldn't even guess. And there he lay. He'd succeeded. He was the worse for wear, true, but even now he was coming around.

Japheth's powers had proved equal to the task of finding her against all odds.

Real hope flushed her, and with it came a swell of affection. It was good to see him.

She placed a palm on his forehead and willed herself into visibility.

"Japheth, wake up," murmured Anusha. Her voice drew his attention. His eyes focused and found her.

They were bloodred.

Anusha pulled her hand away.

"Where am I?" he said.

"We're safe, for the moment," Anusha said. "Long enough for you to get your strength back, I hope." Japheth took a deep breath.

"Anusha," he said. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me," she replied. "My dream, anyhow. I hope you didn't leave my sleeping body back in that iron carriage you arrived in."

Japheth considered for a moment. He looked around, obviously trying to figure out where he was. The creases on the bridge of his nose deepened to canyons.

He tried to rise, and Anusha helped him to his feet.

He said, "No. I didn't leave your body in the trek bell. Good thing, huh?"

She surprised herself by laughing.

It was a release. Her reticence evaporated and she flung herself into his arms. At least she tried to—his hands passed right through hers.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she said. Being insubstantial was as much a curse as a blessing.

She concentrated, willing herself to solidity, then grasped his hands in hers. They were warm and strong.

"Gods, I've missed you," he said, staring into her eyes. "We had so little time before..." The red pupils distracted her from the sentiment, but only a little.

"I'm still angry with you, you know," said Anusha. She blushed. Actually, she felt the opposite of angry just then.

He nodded, then leaned slightly toward her, his hands tightening on hers. She bridged the remaining distance to kiss him.

Her concentration tattered. She grasped emptiness and kissed only air.

Intellectually, she knew she'd lost the mindfulness required to evoke a solid form. Emotionally, in that instant, losing the embrace still felt like a punch to the heart.

"There's no time for this!" came a voice from behind them. "Reunions are wonderful things when safety is assured. But aboleths prowl these tunnels, and the Eldest wakes! Warlock, can you get us out of here?"

"Who said that?" said Japheth. He scanned the tunnel in both directions.

Anusha swallowed. Yeva's interruption couldn't have come at a worse time, but the woman spoke sense. "It's Yeva," she told the warlock. "She was trapped like I was."

"She is invisible to me. She is a dream spirit like you?"

Anusha nodded. "Yes. We met where I broke free of a wall of captured dreams. I think my escape triggered her release too."

"Captured dreams?" repeated Japheth. "More minds than just yours have been stolen by this city?"

Yeva broke in. "The Eldest lies in deathlike sleep, and his memories have settled out of mere conception over the eons. They coat the interior of Xxiphu like frozen dew. Those who draw too near without a body are snared like the rest of his memories."

Japheth narrowed his eyes, obviously unable to see the speaker. But he nodded, as if remembering something he already knew.

“Look, there,” Yeva continued, pointing... a gesture Japheth also missed. Anusha followed Yeva’s finger to another patch of ice like those she had misidentified in the orrery chamber. Even Xxiphu’s nursery walls contained the cast-off recollections of the oldest aboleth.

The warlock continued to look around until he saw the ragged ice face on his own. His brow furrowed, but he didn’t approach it.

“Where exactly are we in Xxiphu? The last thing I remember is falling through my cloak when the Lord of Bats burst the trek bell...”

“We’re in the spawning chambers,” said Anusha, “safe for now from roving aboleths.”

The warlock sighed. He turned back to Anusha. His eyes were just as scarlet as when she’d first seen them. She didn’t remember his traveler’s dust lasting so long.

He said, “If I’d known what we risked when I first gave you the elixir, I—”

“Hush,” she murmured.

“We can make good our escape now. Though... your conveyance is destroyed, and I think your fiery-winged friend carrying it may be no more.”

“An angel of exploration. Summoned by Neifion to pierce the distance between us. Yes... Gethshemeth caught the angel.”

“Gethshemeth!” Anusha said. “The kraken is here?”

“Apparently so.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, I hope. Free us and we can all escape this monstrous city.”

Japheth’s stained gaze was his only response.

Anusha said, “Are you well? Doesn’t your dust allow you to see the unseen? I’ve consciously rendered myself visible so you can see me. Yeva remains a dream figment. But why can’t you see her? Your eyes are as red as I’ve ever seen them.”

"I haven't taken a grain in several hours. My eyes are red with the symptoms of too much dust taken too long."

"But doesn't your pact protect you?"

"My pact is shattered. My powers are gone. Soon enough, I'll reach the end of the crimson road with no hope of return."

"What? I don't understand..."

"Behroun finally shattered my pact stone. All the extra strength I had from the Lord of Bats, as well as all the abilities granted by our pact, returned to him. I've got nothing left except for this cloak. My spells and rituals... they're gone. And with them the protection the Lord of Bats granted me from my addiction to the dust."

Anusha put a hand to her mouth. Japheth's claims seemed like some cruel joke, not the truth.

Yeva said, "So... you can't free us or yourself from Xxiphu, and you're succumbing to some lethal drug. Is that right?"

"Yes," replied Japheth. "But... I have some time before that happens."

"There must be something you can do," Anusha pleaded. "You swore a pact to the Lord of Bats for power.

What about those other creatures you learned about in that old Candlekeep tome? Swear a pact to one of them!"

Japheth began to shake his head, then paused. His pose grew thoughtful, even as a minor tremor in his hands gave the lie to his exterior calm.

"What? Is that possible?" Anusha asked. She hated the desperate sound in her voice.

Anusha noticed a low hum growing louder. She realized she'd been hearing it for some time. Now it swelled, a thunderous noise like subterranean waters rushing just beneath their feet.

The ice sheet crusting the wall behind them cracked. Splinters, of ice calved off but turned to glowing steam before they struck the floor. Several entombed dreams dropped free.

Two were filthy humanoids wearing uncured animal skins for clothing. They lay gasping on the tunnel floor, their eyes rolling in terror. Another creature slid down the wall near them, its shape at first hidden by a billow of steam. When the mist of the evaporating ice swirled away up the tunnel, the creature was revealed as a dark - skinned female elf with hair the color of bleached bone. Her lower body was like a huge spider. The woman—some sort of drow?—loosed a full-throated bellow of rage.

“What is it?” said Japheth, looking around in bewilderment. “I can’t see what made that sound.”

“Some sort of drow... thing!” said Anusha. “And two savages.”

Japheth’s cloak flared and enveloped her.

She found herself and Japheth standing several yards farther from the disintegrating ice. Seeing the rictus of hate on the drow’s face, she swallowed her protest. Instead, she raised her sword.

The two grimy humanoids tried to scramble away from the drow thing’s stamping spider legs, but an arachnid foot, tipped with an ebony spike, skewered one through the chest. He was pinned to the floor. His confused, forlorn cry faded with his life.

Japheth extended his arms as if trying to find a wall in the dark. His head swiveled as he tried to locate the source of the sounds. “The drow monster killed a savage, and now it’s going after the other one,” whispered Anusha. “Let’s go this way—”

Then the drow and the remaining humanoid screamed. The sound conveyed horror that outstripped the earlier cry of the one the drow had stabbed. They screamed for their eternal souls.

Both melted into so much swirling steam, just as the ice that had entombed them had. The mist spun away up the tunnel as if being drawn by a mighty vortex.

Yeva's eyes widened. She stumbled away from the swirling steam and stood so her shoulder touched Anusha's. She was breathing heavily.

"Now what?" Japheth said.

"It's over—the creatures were never real. They unraveled and were drawn away."

They stood silently a moment, eyes riveted to the remaining ice that still looked solid. Anusha wondered how long it would remain so.

"The Eldest's awakening continues, I think," said Yeva. "Its memories and the dreams captured in them are being drawn back to it as its consciousness reassembles."

"Bane's bloody boots," said Japheth. His arm had found its way around Anusha in a protective embrace. Anusha was surprised—she'd subconsciously willed her pauldrons solid enough to give Japheth's arm purchase. It was only an illusion that he could offer physical security, but leaning into him, she realized it was an illusion she appreciated.

"That would be my fate, if not for Anusha," Yeva said, pointing to where the released memories had screamed and dissipated. "And it may still be."

A shiver vibrated through Japheth and into Anusha.

"Are you all right?" she asked, not knowing what else to say.

"At this very moment? Yes, I am," he said. "I can feel you shaking."

He let his arm drop and said, "It's a symptom of my withdrawal. Without my pact to hold it in check, the consequences of too much traveler's dust are coming to a head."

"How long until you succumb?" said Yeva.

"A few days, maybe a tenday..."

Anusha wondered which would happen first, Japheth falling to his addiction or she and Yeva to the Eldest's unremitting wakening.

The thundering, echoing thrum of rushing water fell away to a whisper, still present only because they now recognized it. In the stillness, a different noise became audible—a sucking, sliding sound issuing from the passage below. All turned to see. The faintest glimmer of purple light reflected on the slick sides of a cluster of aboleth eggs down where the tunnel bowed out of sight.

“A lamplighter’s coming,” Yeva hissed.

A bluish aboleth rounded the corner, sliding forward on a thin layer of slime. It moved until it reached a stubby obelisk. It touched a tentacle-fin to the obelisk’s top, and another purple flame blossomed.

The creature slid around the protuberance and advanced toward them. Everyone took a step back.

Anusha had made herself visible so Japheth could see her, so she knew the creature could see her too. She called her sword and set it aglow with golden light. She raised it, imagining its blaze as bright as the sun.

The aboleth stopped dead in the tunnel. Its three eyes blinked in unsynchronized rhythm. Two eyes swiveled to fix on her, and one stared at Japheth.

Japheth spoke three syllables and thrust his hands forward. Except for the way his fingers shook like the gnarled digits of an old man, nothing happened.

The aboleth’s T-shaped mouth opened and it made noises like the sound boots make when walking through mud. Yeva stiffened on hearing the sloshing, sucking noises as if she understood their meaning.

Japheth dropped his hands and shook his head, confused and miserable. “I... I must find—”

The warlock’s foot caught a ridge in the floor and he fell over backward.

The monster rushed forward. Its tentacles lashed across the width of the corridor. Its tri-slit mouth gaped wider, and the sucking sounds transformed into a high-pitched keening. The air around the charging monster churned

with a fine mist of slime. Anusha interposed herself between the creature and Japheth. Seizing every advantage, she let go her visibility to waking creatures. She recalled how she'd used her sword against the water-wrinkled hag back on Green Siren and against the black wyrm Scathrys on the kraken's island.

Yeva lurched ahead of the advancing creature until she came even with Anusha. It was obvious the aboleth couldn't see the woman. Anusha whispered, "Remember, it can't hurt us with a merely physical attack."

"The tentacles aren't our concern. What worries me is whether we can kill it before its birthing scream quickens too many of these eggs!"

Then the monster was before them. The mucous haze surrounding it whispered around the women with no apparent effect. Anusha brought her dream sword down at an angle. The creature charged full into the intangible blade, forehead first, oblivious to the weapon's presence.

A burst of blue flame limned the creature. Its highpitched utterance paused briefly before resuming. One of the creature's tentacles fell limp, and one of its eyes dulled and closed. But it kept moving toward Japheth.

Anusha instinctively stepped out of its path to its left, Yeva to its right.

As it swept past, Yeva glared at the monster, her eyes achieving a lethal focus. A barrage of rainbow colors swept across the aboleth. It shuddered and twisted as tears and cuts spontaneously appeared on its skin in a dozen places. Dark blood oozed forth to mix with the aboleth's coat of slime.

The aboleth shuddered to a halt mere paces from where the warlock struggled to regain his feet. It began to flail the space around it with its still-functioning tentacles. The few times one swept through where either she or Yeva stood, the creature shuddered. Its keening continued unabated.

Anusha slashed and hewed at the slick bulk with abandon.

“Be quiet!” she yelled, and cut the beast again. Its maddening scream finally began to gutter. “Anusha!” came Japheth’s yell.

She followed the direction of his pointing finger with her gaze, back down the corridor where the aboleth had emerged.

A jelly sac of eggs on the ceiling containing three or four particularly large white orbs was quivering and swinging like a pendulum.

One of the eggs in the mass deflated. A flaccid abolethic bulk slid forth and slumped to the tunnel floor. Then another. And another. Two were nearly as large as the aboleth she and Yeva had just dispatched, and one was only half that big. But the smaller eggs also gave up their progeny, producing toy-size aboleths that plopped directly onto their larger siblings or slid down the walls on either side.

The creatures jerked and shuddered, slowly blinking their newborn eyes. They righted themselves within the corridor, flexing their slug bodies and grabbing with their questing tentacles. They looked like nothing so much as a writhing swarm of worms.

Then each and every one cried out, keening like the first one they’d just slain. The sound nearly dashed Anusha from her dream body. Up and down the corridor, the egg sacks that hadn’t reacted to the first aboleth’s scream twitched and shuddered.

“Run!” she shrieked. She needn’t have said it. Yeva and Japheth were already dashing away up the corridor.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren, Beneath the Sea of Fallen Stars

Seren entered her cabin, closed the door behind her, and slid the latch. She was alone again. Finally.

Her cabin didn't rate a porthole. Part of the compensation she'd received when Thoster retained her services was a space to call her own. On a ship packed with cargo and crew, privacy was a luxury. She'd argued that if anyone needed time by herself, it was a wizard. Thoster had relented but given her the smallest, meanest cabin on Green Siren. Truth was, she was glad to be without a porthole. A window, even on the sea, would have been one more place the world could spy on her. Even though she no longer did Thoster's bidding, she held on to her room.

With a wave of her hand, she illuminated the confined space, revealing a table and stool, a bunk, and a narrow wardrobe crammed into the far end of the cabin. Scrolls, tomes, charts, and diagrams were heaped on the table. Chalk marked the walls, and dried ink dribbled the floor.

Seren settled on the stool and closed her eyes. She could only stand the company of others so long before she needed to get away. Her basic dislike of people was something she previously hid, but on a ship filled with pirates, no one really cared that she kept to herself. Concealing her distaste for company hadn't been necessary since she'd left the Red Wizards.

She snorted. She hadn't left willingly. She'd been the victim of circumstances beyond her control. How could anyone have predicted the Spellplague would sweep across Faerûn when it did? No one could have. But she was being held to account for it regardless.

Seren seemed to have a knack for collecting ungodly powerful enemies. First Szass Tam, then Gethshemeth...

and soon enough, probably this Eldest monstrosity Raidon described.

From his place in the circle on deck, the monk had claimed a couple hours of descent lay ahead of Green Siren.

Time enough for her to sneak a nap, she'd thought.

Of course, now she was too keyed up to sleep.

Seren sighed and rose. She turned to the wardrobe and opened it. Her assortment of personal effects hung from the wooden rod or lay folded on the standing closet's single lower shelf. Everything was white, including her spare sari, a long leather coat, a robe, and extra sandals and boots. Everything—except for one heavy crimson robe.

Seren ran her hand along the red robe's dramatically flaring collar. She recalled how much she'd enjoyed wearing the colors of Thay's elite wizard body. People made way for her based solely on her association with the dark mesa. Even other Red Wizards!

The memory of the day she lost everything ambushed her.

They'd been at the zenith of a mountain pass in the Earthfasts, making for Impiltur. The caravan she hired stretched out behind her own wagon, horse-drawn boxes growing progressively smaller down the switchback trail. Each was filled with a portion of the gold taken from the disbanded Red Wizard enclave of Raven's Bluff.

The day was clear but cold. At the top of the pass, she could see for what seemed forever. She imagined the shadowed ridges to the east might be the ramparts of Thay, calling her to a new phase of service.

She was uneasy with her decision, despite her bold pledge and subsequent vicious actions commandeering the treasury. She'd betrayed more than a few acquaintances. Some of them saw Seren's actions as treachery and swore vengeance. All that, and Szass Tam was her new master. He had been Seren's least favorite zulkir, as she was repulsed by necromancy. But when he seized power in Thay, what

choice had she? Become a fugitive like so many others? Give up all she had worked for and achieved?

No.

She had pledged herself to the new order. It was onward, to Thay and hopefully to— The sky flashed.

Seren shaded her eyes and looked up. The sun's normally yellow face was frosted behind a steely sheen. Flares of blue fire ringed it, growing longer every moment Seren watched. The filaments of fire reached toward Faerun, as if eager to embrace the world at long last.

Something slipped effortlessly into Seren's mind and squeezed. She uttered a curse and fell from the seat of her wagon. The impact with the ground wasn't as bad as the pain in her mind.

The Earthfasts shook and the horses reared. Seren rolled into a gully to escape the flashing hooves. But she couldn't escape seeing the wagons lower on the trail pitch over the edge of the trembling precipice.

She blacked out.

When awareness returned, the pain was gone, but so was the treasury—and her magic.

Seren blinked, and she was back in her cabin on Green Siren. The red robe she hadn't worn in eleven years hung before her. She ran her hand down its side, feeling its wellmade weave.

Her past had found her. Red Wizard rebels and probably Thay knew she lived. Morgenthel or other bounty hunters would try to pick up her trail once more. Red Wizards who had a bone to pick with Seren would keep an eye out for her, desiring some measure of payback.

Her plan of remaining beneath her enemies' notice while she recovered a treasure equal to what she'd lost was compromised. At least she'd regained her spells, and then some, in the decade since the catastrophe. And she'd accumulated a tidy sum during that time too. If Raidon was

true to his word, the remainder of what she required might finally be hers.

Which meant it was in her interest to see to it the monk's crazy quest was completed successfully. Seren closed her wardrobe door.

She'd done all she could for the time being to assure the success of their voyage. By anyone's standards, that was a lot. But worry wormed through her gut anyway. Something wasn't right with Thoster.

She didn't trust the pirate. Raidon was a fool if he believed anything that fell from that man's lips.

It wasn't merely that the captain was criminal, out only for his own gain. Far more worrisome was the captain's strange behavior under Gethshemeth's isle. The man was unstable. Who knew when he'd crack next?

Seren quit her cabin and stalked across the deck toward the captain's cabin at the opposite end.

Green Siren was lit by the lantern light reflecting off the gleamtail jacks swarming around the craft. Beyond their protective embrace, the solid rock fell away on both sides, allowing the ship to sail seams of mineral and stone into the depths.

Raidon remained in the ritual circle, one hand across his chest where the Cerulean Sign burned.

Seren paused to watch the half-elf. The monk was oblivious. His wide eyes saw something beyond the deck, they reflected what the gleamtail jacks could sense. Thus Seren had crafted the ritual.

"You're doing well, monk," she murmured.

She moved on to the aftcastle that was built over the captain's quarters. Light gleamed through the porthole in the narrow door to the captain's mess where Thoster took his meals, planned raids, and smoked his odiferous weed.

She pushed into the chamber.

A miniature chandelier gleaming with magical flames provided a warm glow. Thoster was seated at a heavy table

almost too big for the space. A pot of stew steamed at the table's center.

The captain looked up. "Seren! It's been some time since you joined me for supper." The captain ladled himself another serving of stew, then motioned to an empty setting.

Seren sat and allowed the captain to serve her, first a portion of stew, then a finger of rum from a glass bottle.

"So, what news?" said the captain. He motioned to the fine windows installed in the chamber. "I see we're still descending. Does Raidon require something? A rest perhaps?"

"No, the monk seems tireless. Probably drawing energy from his spellscar."

"A handy trick."

"I suppose."

Silence stretched, broken only by the sound of Thoster slurping stew. Finally the captain said, "What's on your mind, Seren?"

"You."

"Oh?" The captain winked. "After all this time, I'm flattered."

"Fm worried that you're a liability."

"Ho! You think I can't handle myself in—"

"I think you're hiding something, something to do with your past. Something that will compromise Raidon's plan to eradicate this threat we face."

Thoster frowned.

Seren said, "Remember when we fought Gethshemeth and its kuo-toa beneath the island? Of course you do. But do you recall when you started blubbering about the eidolon we found there?"

"I'm not sure—"

"You demanded that the monk not hurt it, despite that it nearly proved our end."

The captain put down his mug and spoon. He dropped his head. "I can't explain it."

“Try.”

The man squared his shoulders as if coming to some decision. Seren tensed, readying herself in case the captain made to draw his venomous blade.

Thoster rolled back one sleeve. Tiny scales tiled his arm. Seren’s stomach dropped.

“What does this mean?” she said.

“I’m changing, Seren. I don’t know why. Something to do with the kuo-toa is my guess. These are growing all over me. Can you... can you stop it?” The man’s face looked more vulnerable than the wizard had ever seen it.

Seren examined the scales, searching for arcane telltales of a curse or transformative magic. If this was the result of a spell or ritual, she might be able to reverse it... but no. Whatever this was, it wasn’t magic’s handiwork—or at least not recent magic.

“Thoster,” she said, “whatever’s afflicting you, it is fundamental to your nature. I can’t remove it.” The captain sighed.

“But I might be able to slow it down.”

“Aye, that I’d welcome, Seren. How?”

She said, “Tell me everything you know about it.”

“I don’t know anything!”

She frowned her annoyance. “Don’t be an idiot, Thoster. I’ve heard you talk about your ‘polluted blood’ on more than one occasion. You must know something.”

Thoster helped himself to more rum, then said, “Well, my auntie raised me—I never knew my mother. Auntie was one for the drink, and we weren’t close. She always screamed at me when she finished off her liquor, that I was ‘an ungrateful little monster with unclean blood.’ Never knew what she meant, but it helped my reputation when I was older. I took it as a badge of honor ‘cause it made me special, especially in the rough crowd I ran with. Helped me get where I am now, in fact. I never thought it was anything more than the ravings of a drunk, until...”

"Until what?" said Seren.

"These damned scales started replacing my skin, what else?"

"Below the island—you recognized that eidolon. Or something inside you did. Try to remember exactly what you saw and what you felt."

Thoster's face was red and his breath came faster. He said, "I... it was like I knew the statue. Like it was maybe... some sorta representation of... my real mum."

Seren said, "A lobster-clawed shrine dedicated to a fish goddess reminded you of your mother? That can't be good."

"No, don't seem so," acknowledged the captain.

Seren closed her eyes. She tried to dredge up lore associated with kuo-toa deities. It seemed a good bet most kuo-toa revered Umberlee, the Queen of the Deeps, or one of Umberlee's exarchs. Probably the latter—

Umberlee's symbol was a curling wave, not lobster claws. Of course, the kuo-toa on the island had revered Gethshemeth, and Gethshemeth had obviously become a servitor of the Sovereignty.

The animate shrine that attacked them on the island had seemed perverted too. Its head had been hewn off and replaced with some sort of animating rune.

So where did that leave Thoster?

Seren opened her eyes just enough to study the captain. Was he half kuo-toa? She'd never heard of such a thing.

Not that that didn't make it possible. The eidolon to some hoary old kuo-toa exarch made the captain sentimental for his dear old missing mother, who he couldn't consciously remember. Which could mean he was either of kuo-toa lineage, or the exarch really was his—

She shook her head at such a foolish idea.

"What?" said Thoster.

"Oh, just considering some outlandish possibilities."

The captain snorted. "I don't think anything's too outlandish at this point!"

“Mmm, that’s relative. Anyhow, Captain, I might be able to help you.”

“You know what’s afflicting me?”

She shrugged. “Close enough. You know it yourself. I don’t even want to think about how it happened, but looks like your auntie had it right. You’ve got something of the kuo-toa in you.”

“Why’s it coming out now?”

“Something’s triggered it. But like I said, I might be able to slow it down some or, if we’re lucky, halt the change altogether.”

“I’m listening.”

Seren smiled. “Good. Now, before we get down to specifics, I’d like to discuss my fee.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR), Xxiphu

A lane of shadow stretched into existence between the world and its echoes. The massive hound named Tamur hurtled down the shadow road, hot on the trail of succulent quarry. That which fled before it was not flesh, though, and the hound was hard pressed to maintain the scent and the lane of shadow simultaneously.

Tamur's eladrin mistress strode behind it. Her mere presence froze water out of the air, the hound felt her like a chill wind behind it. Though her steps were measured and graceful, she easily kept pace.

The hound snuffled, momentarily, confused. The scent wavered. Ahead of them, the walls of gloom making up the corridor decayed and threatened to collapse.

"Do not lose it, Tamur," said the woman.

The ebony creature was far more intelligent than a normal animal, and more vicious too. Yet its loyalty to its mistress echoed that of a dog's to its owner. It wanted to please Malyanna.

Tamur redoubled its effort. It put its muzzle down, snuffling and snorting. The hound tracked an intangible mote embodying a splintered oath. The mote winged across the dimensions, pointing the way to an archfey its mistress wished to meet.

If it was possible to track such a thing, Tamur would do it.

The essence it tracked ceased moving. It was close! Unconsciously, Tamur allowed the shadow lane to begin to collapse.

Ahead, the corridor widened. Shafts of fiery light broke through the leading discontinuity. The orange gleams dissolved the shadow walls. The hound leaped from the shadow, which immediately tattered and faded. Its mistress was only a step behind Tamur.

They stood at the curbed edge of a stone balcony.

Tamur glanced over the edge, sniffing. It saw a fierywinged creature being pulled below the surface of a murky subterranean sea. A dozen thick, boneless arms wrapped the angel in an unbreakable grip. The red light quickly faded.

That was not the source of the scent. But it was close.

The hound turned to its mistress. Her pupil-less eyes glimmered with the phosphorescent glow of the wide cavern the balcony overlooked.

When she smiled, Tamur was glad. That meant it had done well. It watched her as she in turn took in her surroundings.

Malyanna murmured, "How convenient that of all places, I find myself here."

The hound could make out her basic words but couldn't put meaning to them. That wasn't unusual. That she was content was all that was really important. When Malyanna was happy, she indulged Tamur with treats that usually involved live prey.

A new smell sparked across the hound's awareness. It barked as it turned to the balcony's interior. They weren't alone.

A figure stood amid smoking metallic shards. It was a man, bald and pale, with narrow squinting eyes and pointed ears. He wore elaborately cut black clothing, as elegant as if he were dressed for a prominent theater production. An aura of needle-toothed bats swirled around him. He stood nearly seven feet tall, and the muscles of his lean form bunched beneath his clothing.

Tamur took an instant dislike to the man, despite that he reeked of the scent the hound had chased through shadow. Tamur loosed a low growl.

The Lord of Bats preened. He couldn't recall how long it had been since he'd felt so fine. He smiled when the great

black dog growled. It amused him to consider all the ways he could bring the hound's life to a swift and painful end.

And there was the eladrin noble.

"Malyanna," he said, his voice rich with barely contained triumph, "strange you arrive on the heels of my release. Stranger still you were able to find me at all, here in this place history never knew. I can only presume it was you who broke my pact stone? Do I have you to thank for my liberation?"

The woman bowed. "As you say, Neifion. I can see just by looking at you that you're nearly back to your old self. You're in my debt."

He laughed. As he did, the haze of bats surrounding him screeched in accompaniment. The hound's ears lay down at the volume. When his mirth subsided, Neifion said, "Yes. I have nearly regained my full vigor. I am the Lord of Bats once more, in more than just name. All that once was mine is mine again, save for my lesser skin. Which is not far from here—I'll have that back soon too."

"Have it back from the warlock Japheth? Is he nearby?"

"Yes... but where is your ally Behroun Marhana? I have a score to settle with him too. He should have been the one to sunder the pact stone the moment he stole it from the warlock, as he swore!"

"Forget about that scrap of mortal flesh. I left him bleeding on your castle floor. When you return home, he'll be waiting. Rather, let's speak of Japheth. Where is he?"

The lord of shadow-mantled Darroch Castle smiled. He fastened the full intensity of his gaze upon the eladrin.

An envelope of shrieking bats flowed from him to her, instantly surrounding the woman. She was buffeted by dozens of leathery wings.

He said, "If you've broken your alliance with Behroun, why do you still care about the warlock's whereabouts?"

Why so interested, Malyanna?"

The woman raised a hand. The flapping creatures surrounding her frosted over and scattered away on their last trajectories, clearing the air around her. "Don't do that again, or you may anger me."

The Lord of Bats snorted. "Perhaps I'd like to see you angry. It would bring color to your ice white cheeks."

The shadow hound growled, baring teeth the size of Neifion's fingers.

He glanced at the canine. His eyes became pools of night.

The mastiffs growl choked off, becoming a whimper. Like a beaten cur, the dark beast sank to its belly and crawled toward the man. Its demeanor was that of a dog hoping for forgiveness but fearing a cuff.

"Do not," thundered Malyanna, "play with the loyalties of my servitors."

She snapped her fingers. An unseen force struck Neifion. He spun under the blow, but he did not lose his feet.

Instead, his cape flared outward, transforming into great wings. His limbs lengthened, and his pale skin sprouted ratty fur. The Lord of Bats called back to himself his greater shape of old. Energy raced through his expanded stature. He was a hybrid creature whose leathery wings stretched from one end of the balcony to the other. He shrieked, baring teeth far larger than the hound's.

He swept one enormous wing down. Its leading edge struck Malyanna's midsection, and she spun off the balcony, windmilling into the open space beyond the curb. She fell out of sight a moment later without making a single sound of pain or protest.

"Too easy" he rumbled. His massive head scanned the balcony. He huffed, then took a step back toward the tunnel entrance. He regarded the hound as it retreated, its eyes wary.

The mastiff shook its head violently, as if trying to clear its ears of water. The Lord of Bats nodded and said, "Still

ensorcelled—it is only a stupid brute “ He stepped past the canine.

Neifion reached the balcony exit. The trek bell partially blocked the tunnel, making the opening awkward to pass through at his current stature. Well, perhaps he could squeeze—

A cold wind blew on his neck. He turned in time to see an explosion of ice crystals spit an enraged Malyanna onto the balcony.

She reached up to his much larger shape before he was ready and placed her palm on his sternum. Where she touched, winter sprouted.

The Lord of Bats screamed. The pain shocked through him, making him clumsy. His unfurled wings snapped him forward and up, away from the exit and over the eladrin’s head. He twisted in midair so that when he lighted on the balcony’s edge, he faced her. Icicles draped him, and a rime of frost coated his fur.

He pushed through the frigid torpor and called on the essence of the Fey wild, whose power reached into the world even there on the doorstep of Xxiphu.

Malyanna began to counteract, but before her slashing gestures concluded, thick vines burst from the floor and seized her. The vines were studded with long thorns that wept poison. She shrieked—not in pain, but rather in fullthroated rage.

“You’ll regret crossing a priestess of the Sovereignty!” Her voice was the harsh roar of the blizzard. Even as the vines struggled to twine her tighter and puncture her white flesh, she crooned a new series of syllables, more a song than a spell. The eladrin’s melody was not a call to winter. It was an obscene mantra whose words were each corruptions of sentient language. The lilting music fell from Malyanna’s mouth and stained reality with its mad juxtaposition of pitch, tone, and melody.

Neifion fluttered his massive wings. For all his power, the strange energy rippling from the eladrin ruffled him.

It was utterly alien to his experience. He wondered if she really was an eladrin noble at all, or something that wore the fey flesh as a guise.

Malyanna's song was answered. From the dark entrance that framed her came a flicker of purplish light. A sliding, muddy rush of noise murmured from the opening. The sound suggested to Neifion a stampede of worms, if those worms were the size of bulls.

Neifion took in the iron flinders of the trek bell. He darted a glance down the troubling sides of the edifice on which he perched, then up, looking for other exits. He couldn't immediately detect any. Finally, he looked past the vinewrapped eladrin. Unwholesome shadows swarmed in the tunnel behind her.

Neifion decided to chance another tactic.

He allowed his greater form to lapse. His leathery wings folded away and his bulk deflated. He melted into the suited, caped, pale-skinned version of himself that most creatures found more amenable to conversation.

He raised his hands and said, "I believe we started off on the wrong foot, Malyanna. What did you say you wished to learn from me? Japheth's whereabouts? Perhaps we can come to an accord. I don't really wish to fight."

Though his words were calm and measured, the Lord of Bats ground his teeth between each sentence.

He waved a hand, the vines holding Malyanna withered. and became dust.

The woman ceased her sick tune. When the last note died away, the garish light from the corridor failed too, and with it the disquieting shadows the light had thrown. She shook out her garments. Residual dust from the Lord of Bats's clinging vines scattered.

"I would prefer feeding you to those who inhabit this relic of a failed promise," Malyanna said. "But I find myself

pressed for time, after all these long centuries. So I ask you once again, where is Japheth?"

The Lord of Bats replied, "Let us throw in together, you and I, Malyanna. What say you? I can lead you to the traitor warlock easily enough. All I ask in return—"

"All you'll get in return," interrupted the woman, "is your life."

Neifion's brow darkened. Did she seek to provoke him? "You are a formidable creature. I admit you surprised me just now. You have more resources than any eladrin, noble or otherwise, should have claim to. But do not make the mistake of underestimating my power. I doubt you know its full extent. You might find yourself slain in turn, were I to loose it. Do not forget I am a lord of the Feywild itself. I number among the archfey."

The woman snorted, but then scowled as she considered the man's words.

Neifion waited.

"You seek one last alliance, Neifion?" she finally said. "Fine. Let us work together until we find the damned human. I presume he is somewhere in Xxiphu. I could locate him, given time. But if you can lead me directly to him, I am ready to follow. You can kill him, and I... I will take back something he once promised to deliver to me."

The Lord of Bats grinned widely, as if all their former strife were forgotten. He said, "The Dreamheart? Of all the lies you told me, that one thing remains true?"

She shrugged.

"Accompany me, then. I sense the pact breaker is this way." He pointed past the shattered bell into the corridor beyond. The sounds and the strange light the tunnel had emitted were now absent.

He continued, "You obviously have a way with the natives. Together, we can corral Japheth relatively quickly.

Without my powers to give him teeth, he is like a babe out of his crib."

Malyanna said, "I can command some of the lesser creatures that reside here. The greater ones may, against all reason, begrudge my presence. We may have to fight our way forward, if so."

The Lord of Bats grinned. "I look forward to slaking my thirst before the main course."

"Be careful of what you eat here. It may give you indigestion."

The two passed together into the narrower corridor. Neifion glanced with barely concealed disgust at the layer of slime that coated the rounded tunnel. He noted the deep breaths the eladrin took of the briny odor suffusing the place—and her satisfied smile.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren, Beneath the Sea of Fallen Stars

Raidon directed the ship downward, piercing Faerun's rocky foundations. He concentrated upon the needs of each moment, finding that the deeper Green Siren descended, the more difficult his task. The thread connecting his symbol and the city of Xxiphu remained constant, but the "terrain" through which they traveled grew ever more treacherous.

On several occasions, the ship's path intersected air-filled hollows. The first time, Green Siren lurched and fell several man-heights before Raidon realized the danger. He yanked the mental reins yoked to the gleamtail jacks.

Instead of smashing into the floor of the unexpected vault, the ship descended as gently as a petal. He had dealt with several such hollows since the first one. However, each time they pierced a new kind of environment, the ship reacted unexpectedly.

He started upon finding Seren and Thoster standing near him, trying to get his attention.

"Uh, yes?" said Raidon.

Seren said, "Thoster's suffering from poor parenting. How long before we arrive at our destination? I think I can... ameliorate the affliction of his birthright if we have an hour to spare."

The monk shook his head, feeling dim-witted. He didn't have the first idea what the wizard meant. He said, "What are you—"

A knot of harder mineral bumped the whole ship to starboard. Green Siren threatened to keel over, but Raidon's quick adjustment brought the deck level again.

The captain had grabbed the mainmast, but Seren had toppled over.

"What was that?" Thoster said.

"A symptom of your interruption," said Raidon.

Seren picked herself up. She said, "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were being petty. Now, do we have an hour?"

"Probably," said Raidon. "Now leave me. I'm sure you can handle whatever it is."

Thoster grinned and doffed his hat. Seren opened her mouth as if to argue, but then said, "Very well."

Raidon closed his eyes and instantly dismissed them from his consciousness.

They had already spent the better part of a day descending. His constant adjustment of the gleamtails was having an effect. Several of the tiny fish summoned from the Chaos had fallen from the school and gasped out their last on the planking. Seren had said the protective aura generated by them would last a tenday before it dispersed. Raidon was certain they had about half that much time, given his direct experience.

Thankfully, he sensed that the aberrant taint he traced was close. Perhaps only a few hours to go.

The sound of Angul groaning brought Raidon back to the moment. He'd lost himself in the mesmerizing descent. The Sign burned with proximity. Xxiphu was nearly close enough to touch!

He called out, "Captain Thoster! Seren!"

The wizard was seated on a pile of coiled hawser that lay on the deck along the railing. She closed a slender tome, then stood and slipped the book into a haversack. She said, "Are we there?"

Raidon said, "Close. Where's the captain?"

"Thoster's closed in his cabin with the ship's healer. After our session, he required a few stitches." Seren turned to a nearby crew member and said, "Go tell your captain we need him."

Raidon slowed their descent to a crawl while they waited. "Your session?" he said.

Seren sighed. "It's not important, Raidon. I handled it, like you asked."

The monk nodded, recalling the one-sided conversation. Something about the captain needing some kind of affliction removed?

When the captain showed up on deck, he was shrugging into his coat. The left sleeve of his linen shirt was pulled back, leaving room for a wide layer of bandages around his forearm. Blood marked the bandages. In his hand dangled a leather cord.

"Feeling better?" said Seren.

The captain scowled and said, "I suppose, but no thanks to you. I didn't know you'd be taking a sample!" Seren said, "Remember to keep that amulet close. It'll keep your change in check. Probably."

Thoster just shook his head.

"Prepare yourselves and the ship," Raidon said. "The aboleth city is moments away."

Thoster nodded. He slipped the amulet around his neck. Raidon noticed a fan of fish scales hanging at the cord's end. There wasn't enough time to pursue the questions that sprang to his mind.

The captain turned slightly to address his crew. "Listen up! Get this tub shipshape! Prepare to ram and to board!"

It may be some godsforsaken alien temple we'll find, but by Shar's black heart, I guess monsters bleed the same as men and elves!"

Green Siren plunged through the ceiling of a massive vault half drowned in an oily sea. The cavern was pierced by an obelisk wider than several city blocks and ten times as tall as it was wide. Its foundation was drowned in murky fluid, and the upper end was jammed into the ceiling. Rookeries, balconies, inscriptions, runes, and other features gaped like hungry mouths all across its face.

“Impossible!” said Seren. Her face was slack with incipient terror. The wizard moved so she actually stood next to the monk, inside the ritual circle. Raidon was relieved she didn’t try, unconsciously or not, to wrest control of the gleamtails from him.

The half-elf concentrated to slow Green Siren’s descent. He saw a gallery high up along the face near where the obelisk plunged into the ceiling. The opening looked wide enough to hold the entire ship.

But Green Siren was heavy, and he’d learned the gleamtail jacks were least adapted to air. The deck sawed left, then right, as Raidon tried to stop the craft’s downward trajectory.

“What’re you up to?” said Captain Thoster from his left. “Trying to shake me off my own ship?”

Raidon glanced at the man. The privateer had both hands wrapped around the railing. His wide hat tipped over and began to fall. The captain released one hand and snatched it before it descended more than a couple of feet.

Then Thoster’s eyes grew round in surprise as he gazed into the abyss.

“What is it?”

“That damned kraken!” said Thoster. “It’s down there in the water!”

“Gethshemeth?” said Seren. “How can that be?”

“Damn your spells, how should I know? I ain’t a wizard! I...”

The captain gasped. He smashed his hat down on his head, then snatched his sword from its sheath.

“It’s coming up to give us a kiss,” Thoster yelled. “Our little gleamtails ain’t the only thing that’s learned how to swim in air.”

Angul released a howl of fury from its sheath on the monk’s back. A couple of nearby crew looked around for the source of the atonal noise.

Even without touching it, Raidon sensed the sword urging him to confront the kraken. But if he released the leashed gleamtails, the ship might fall out of the air.

"Seren, take over," he said. The wizard's pale skin had taken on a greenish cast at the news of Gethshemeth's presence. But she nodded and stepped nearer.

The monk released control of the ritual even as Seren took it up. Green Siren jerked down and to port, then hovered, slowly turning in place.

"Do you have it?" Raidon asked.

Seren nodded.

"Make for that gallery," he said, pointing toward the high cavity he'd spied. "I'll deal with Gethshemeth."

Raidon leaped from the circle to the railing in one movement. He kicked one foot between the spars to anchor himself.

He dragged Angul from his sheath. The sword exulted, catching fire immediately. A pulse of certitude surged into Raidon's blood.

He leaned over and saw a monstrous thing approaching from below. It was a creature meant for watery abysses, but Gethshemeth hurtled up through moist air as if born to it. Tentacles slapped and grasped upward, pulling the scarred bulk behind. Eyes like twin fire pits burned with mad hatred. Raidon saw the stump of the tentacle he had severed when he'd fought the creature tendays before, the one that had held the Dreamheart.

Something had grown back in its place. It was an irregular, splotchy globe sprinkled with a dozen tiny eyes, all blinking stupidly. Even through the unyielding conviction Angul woke in Raidon, the tumorlike growth brought a taste of bile to his lips. Angul, seeing what Raidon saw, screamed his outrage against the insult to the world's natural order. The blade's fire leaped higher, and the symbol on Raidon's chest burst into flame. Its hue alternated between the

lighter cerulean hue of the Sign and the darker blue fire of a spellscar.

The display didn't slow the approaching creature. In moments, the rising kraken's tentacles would wrap around Green Siren.

Raidon knew, from the time he'd spent in the ritual circle's center, that the gleamtails could not hope to hold aloft both the ship and a kraken of Gethshemeth's size.

"Knowing is dust unless action follows after," Raidon muttered, one of the proverbs of Xiang Temple.

He grabbed one end of the hawser Seren had earlier used as a stool. The other end of the coiled rope was tied to a stanchion. Good. He dived off the side of the ship. A line of blue fire traced his path downward.

Half-elf and kraken met below Green Siren. Angul struck some kind of invisible ward surrounding Gethshemeth, producing a clap of thunder. The creature's ward shattered, deflecting Raidon's trajectory. Instead of plunging the Blade Cerulean directly into the base of the writhing tentacles, the monk tumbled off course.

A spiral of tentacle wide as house caught him across the back. Pain clutched him only for a heartbeat before Angul sucked it away. But in the moment of disorientation, he lost his hold on his lifeline to Green Siren.

He and the end of the rope continued to fall past the kraken's bulk. Raidon kicked backward desperately, trying to flail his open hand toward the rope's end before its length played out. The braided hemp of the rope slapped across his palm. Not an instant too soon—

The slack in the rope gave out. Raidon's plunge jerked to an arm-wrenching stop. White fire blossomed in his shoulder, forearm, and fingers, pulling a scream from him. But he didn't let go. Angul wouldn't allow him that luxury.

The monk dangled at the cord's end like a cat toy displayed for the kraken's play. Angul whispered in his mind, *Draw the beast in. I will end its aberrant life.*

Gethshemeth hovered in the dank air, midway between Raidon, who now hung below it, and the barnacled keel of Green Siren above. The tiny heads of several crew appeared over the railing, their eyes wide with fear.

Lure it down to us, Angul urged.

Raidon complied. He concentrated on his spellscar. The Sign of his adopted order pulsed. Shafts of cerulean light lanced the kraken's bulk. Where the light touched Gethshemeth, its skin seared and smoked.

The creature pirouetted in the air, a motion made obscene by the creature's unnatural bulk moving so delicately.

It turned its full attention to Raidon.

Angul fed more energy to the monk. New strength rippled through the half-elf's muscles, starting in his hand and spreading quickly through the rest of his body.

When it reached his chest, his Sign responded with another pulse of radiance that needled the tentacled hulk anew.

Gethshemeth roared. Like branches in a tornado, its arms lashed wildly as it dropped on Raidon.

The monk's eyes were riveted on the tentacle bearing the grotesque blinking tumor. Even as he was caught up and squeezed, he focused past the sound of bones breaking in his chest and legs.

He called on his Sign and the sword and surged forward, struggling through the battering, squeezing arms. A swing of the Blade Cerulean, and the misshapen nodule spurted free. Greenish purple ichor geysered, and all the eyes pocking the growth rotated in their sockets as one, attempting to fix Raidon with their mismatched gaze.

Some kind of fell influence lived in those eyes... but gravity pulled the severed pod down and away too quickly.

Gethshemeth's tentacles spasmed and released Raidon. The monk clung to the supporting rope.

The creature's mouth opened wide. It was horribly akin to a human's but much larger. A noise like a baby's wail issued from it, sending prickles up Raidon's scalp.

Even as Angul's influence began to reknit Raidon's damaged bones and sinews, Gethshemeth shrugged its colossal tentacles. It coughed out three arcane syllables. The great kraken's outline turned fuzzy and uncertain, and then it was gone. Air fell into the space the kraken's bulk had occupied, creating a final thunderclap.

Raidon hung alone beneath the floating hull of Green Siren.

Monk and sword voiced a simultaneous shout of fury. Gethshemeth had fled. You were not fast enough again, Angul chided. Had I made contact, I would have prevented it from displacing. Instead of arguing, the monk meditated on his Sign. Both the sword and the Sign were tools created by the ancient order of Keepers. But the Sign was pure, Angul was tainted. With the Sign's strength, he carefully disentangled the sword's wants and desires from his own.

He finally gathered the will to sheathe Angul. It burned and shook, but was rendered powerless.

Raidon wound an arm and his upper body into the hawser so that he no longer had to support all his weight with just one or even two hands.

He rested, swaying gently in empty space. He was content for the moment to be alone in the dark air and to study the vast facade of Xxiphu. The runes and relief sculpture slowly crept across the primeval structure's face.

The many openings remained empty of activity, though some glowed with the faintest hint of purplish light.

Other than the slithering inscriptions, he detected no movement or sound. The half-elf was grateful the city appeared to be, at least on its exterior, asleep.

Appearances could be deceiving, he knew. His Sign, born of an ancient Seal, tingled with constant feedback.

Aberrations were moving inside Xxiphu.

The rope jerked. He glanced up. Even more heads craned over the railing where his lifeline connected. He heard Thoster shout something, then many hands began to haul on the rope.

When Raidon was back on deck, the captain clapped him on the shoulder. "You're crazy. But you saved my ship."

"Yes. But Gethshemeth escaped again."

"Ho! But you put the fear in it! It won't cow us again with its size and power. That's the last we'll see of that beast, I warrant." An unnatural glee possessed Thoster. His smile seemed too bright to Raidon. A sheen of sweat glistened on the captain's forehead.

"Are you fevered?" Raidon asked.

The captain said, "Aren't we all?" The man turned to see to his crew.

Worry wrinkled the monk's brow, but other concerns pressed far harder.

"Seren, how goes the navigation?" he called.

The wizard had stopped Green Siren's rotation sometime during his brief exchange with Gethshemeth. Raidon saw the blank look of concentration on the woman's face—probably a mirror of his expression as he'd guided the ship's descent through the earth.

After a few moments, Seren replied, "We're moving. It took me awhile to figure out how to get the gleamtails to rise, they'd rather sink. But I've got it now."

Raidon realized the ship was indeed increasing its altitude, albeit slowly. Moreover, the gallery he'd earlier pointed out to Seren was noticeably closer.

"YouVe done well," he said.

He moved to the ship's bow. The city's horrid face loomed larger. The writhing inscriptions didn't bear looking on for too long, so he found himself constantly flicking his eyes away. He couldn't discern if the shapes were actually moving, or if their convoluted shapes merely suggested animation.

Finally they reached the gallery.

The massive cavity engulfed the ship. A shelf along the interior side was hollowed with several secondary tunnels—some so small a human would have a hard time crawling into them, and one so large the ship could have almost fit down it. The light of the gleamtails threw golden and reddish highlights off the dark stone. A smell akin to rotting fish enfolded them. The odor was mixed with other spices Raidon couldn't identify.

"Tie up!" yelled Thoster. Several crew members grabbed up coiled ropes, but only stared nervously at the dark stone platform that had to serve as their pier. None moved to comply.

Seren said, "The gleamtail jacks will maintain Green Siren in this position, even if I leave the ritual circle."

"I'm sure," said the captain, implying by his tone that he was anything but confident. "I wager it'll do no harm to tie up as well, eh?"

Seren shrugged.

Raidon leaped over the side onto the platform. The air was moist and suffused with tiny particles of light. He walked the shelf from one end to the other, avoiding stone columns that speckled the floor. When it was apparent that monstrous creatures were not beating a path from the tunnels to swarm him, the crew clambered over the ship's side to join him. They tied up Green Siren using some of the larger columns as bollards.

"What now?" said the captain, his eyes almost eager. "We move into the city and discover its heart," said Raidon. "We need to find the creature from which the Dreamheart was carved. If fate is kind, we'll find it before its progeny wake it. Somewhere in this massive structure, aboleths are singing to rouse their father. We must find that chamber and kill the children before the parent can open the rest of its eyes. If destiny is on our side, perhaps we may even hope Angul can slay the Eldest as it sleeps defenseless."

Everyone just looked at the monk. Finally the captain asked, "What odds do you give on the warlock showing up down here and interfering with us?"

Raidon blinked. "Why would he do that?"

Thoster said, "He's connected to this place as much as you—he carries the Dreamheart."

"His presence here seems unlikely. You experienced how difficult a time we had finding and reaching Xxiphu—and I had the Cerulean Sign to guide me. Yes, he has the Dreamheart, though it won't do him any good if we slay the Eldest before all its eyes are open."

The captain said, "I think you're wrong, Raidon."

"What's this about, Thoster?"

The captain clapped! Raidon on the shoulder. "I like to be prepared for contingencies. Think about it—why'd the warlock take off with the Dreamheart to begin with? Because of the girl. If Japheth had got her free from the stone, she'd have woken up by now. She hasn't. Which I think means—"

"That her mind isn't in the Dreamheart," finished Seren, her tone incredulous. "Otherwise, someone with Japheth's arcane connections would have freed her."

"Exactly," said Thoster. "My guess is her mind was sucked down here!"

Raidon shrugged. "Could be. It doesn't change our plans."

"Well, perhaps we should we pack her up so we can carry her easily?"

"Anusha? No, of course not. Bringing an Unconscious person into the city would be a nuisance at best, and a danger to all of us trying to keep her safe in a fight. We'll put your dog in her cabin to watch over her."

Thoster rubbed his chin. "Well, I suppose that's fine."

"Are you worried about facing Japheth?" Seren asked the captain.

"No," said Thoster. "At least, not since your ritual." He put his hand on the amulet cord. "Still, how often does a fellow

walk into a primeval relic filled with half-petrified monsters
older than gods?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Hall of Spawning

The man dreamed.

A many-columned structure stood on a mountain at the edge of a void. Vast scale was implied by the misted clouds that wreathed the peak and edifice alike. The columns surrounded an inner citadel of solid stone—solid but for a gigantic gate of star iron. The enormous valve was pitted and ancient. Sometimes it rattled and shook with the slow cadence of mighty waves, as if something inside strove to throw it open with steady, unrelenting strength.

The man knew with dreamy conviction that on the other side of the gate stretched forgotten dimensions that lay beyond the stars. Through its sealed gap, whispered this unearned certainty, infinities stretched outside mortal and divine conception alike.

A woman in golden armor stood before the gate, in the shadow of the towering columns. Her lips moved, but the man couldn't hear her. Her words were important, that was clear. Something he needed to understand immediately. If he failed to put meaning to her increasingly desperate attempts to communicate, he realized something catastrophic would shudder to its world-breaking culmination...

Japheth came awake with a cry.

He lay curled like a newborn within a hollow niche coated with residual slime. His cloak was draped around his body like a shroud.

The warlock levered himself up onto his elbows and saw a narrow phosphorescent tunnel snaking up and away.

He was alone and glad for it. The dream was similar to ones he'd had before, but unlike them too. Anusha was in the dream mouthing the same incomprehensible warnings

as always, but her surroundings seemed more dire than the crazed visions his sleeping mind had earlier painted.

Japheth shivered, but not from the dream or the cold. It was his body betraying him. He couldn't predict when the shakes would surface in his flesh. The trembling in his hands and the flinching tic in his expression appeared without warning and stayed overlong. Sometimes when he concentrated, the quavering subsided. A few times, the shuddering intensified so much he feared a seizure was imminent.

And what of his abilities? His mind probed for his missing spells like a tongue unable to ignore an empty tooth socket.

The fabric of his cloak was wound with subtle power and abilities that far eclipsed a normal cape, that was true.

But the powers of transposition and protection it provided were hardly compensation for the arcane might Japheth had wielded just hours earlier.

Without his arcane tools, he was little more than a man far out of his depth. Without the patronage of his sworn pact, he was succumbing to the end stages of a lethal addiction to traveler's dust.

He was in a bad way. If he didn't take a crystal every hour or so, he would slide right off the end of the putative road and die, his soul claimed by demons. But every time he took a crystal, he also moved farther down that demonbuilt avenue and closer to the precipice, although at a less breakneck pace.

But fast or slow, he would soon be dragged into the Abyss.

He lashed out with a curled fist at the sticky niche wall. His knuckle split open, but the pain was a welcome, if brief, diversion.

Japheth put his knuckle to his lips and glanced around. Neither Anusha nor Yeva had returned. They sought a way through the spawning hall that avoided newly birthed aboleths. The creatures couldn't see the women, but they were all too aware of him.

"It was supposed to be different," he murmured. "When I imagined us together, we were going to be so happy. I imagined us attending Midsummer Festival, sharing candied apples, and laughing in the sun. And as the sun westered, our embraces would grow more urgent..." He sighed and shook his head to dislodge such distracting thoughts.

"Now all we have is horror."

He would be dead in a day, perhaps two. And the one who had captured his heart would be left to fend for herself in an impossible situation. She would likely perish not long after he succumbed to the dust. Her soul would become food for the Eldest.

It was intolerable.

Everything had taken on a shade of crimson through the lenses of his permanently dust-hued eyes.

"By the Fangs of Neifion," Japheth swore. He was near to the precipice. If he closed his eyes, the scarlet plain was already waiting. A road slashed across the plain, and he could feel the bone cobbles through his boots.

From where he stood along its length, he could just glimpse the road's awful terminus.

The scene had blotted out his senses years earlier. That time, he'd seen the road even when his eyes were wide open.

That time, he'd been pushed to the crimson road's precipitous end. He'd witnessed the space beyond: a tooth-lined gullet where all dust users were finally consumed, mind and soul. Demons winged through that hungry hole, culling souls at their leisure.

A desperate addict will shout all manner of promises to the empty air when all his debts are finally called due.

No one was more surprised than Japheth when his desperate pleas were answered by a great bat that sailed down from the burning sky. Neifion, the Lord of Bats, had heard his promises and responded.

In the urgency of his need, Japheth pledged his soul to the Lord of Bats if only the creature would save him.

Only later did he learn he'd offered Neifion far too much—but the Lord of Bats took him at his word. And so Japheth was saved from his lethal addiction to crimson dust by swearing a pact to an archfey.

He'd lived several years since then, his dust-promised death sentence stayed by the pact. But now the agreement was shattered. Japheth's powers were fled, and Neifion no longer shielded him from the poor choices of his youth.

"I doubt," he whispered, "my old patron will take me back. I need a new one. Ha! Down in this hellhole, that's so likely."

In that moment, a scheme slithered into his mind.

It was an awful idea, and dangerous in equal measure. But he already knew it was his only option.

"Wait," he protested.

The logic was inescapable. He needed a new patron. He needed a new pact. Death was certain for him and Anusha otherwise.

"It's nonsense, it's insane!" he whispered.

But was it really? He had pledged a pact to Neifion, a creature of bloodlust and dubious ethics. If he hadn't gone overboard in what he'd initially sworn, things would have been far different, he rationalized. He could have gone about his own purposes, and the Lord of Bats wouldn't have taken such an overweening interest in Japheth's activities.

Probably.

Of course he wasn't sure, but what was certain in his life? His own gruesome death and Anusha's soon thereafter if he didn't try to save them, that was what.

He'd worked at cross-purposes to Neifion's goals. He could do the same to a new entity to whom he swore the pacts of a warlock, right?

Uncertainty coiled in his stomach.

Another thought occurred to him, this one almost comforting. He was an old hand at swearing pacts. He'd learned in the school of hard knocks how not to craft one. He had a pretty good idea, now, how to go about devising a pact that would not only grant him power but also avoid promising his soul away to a new master.

He took an unsteady breath.

The decision was already made the moment he thought of it. All the rest was just delay.

He reached into the folds of his cloak and produced the Dreamheart.

The eye in the stone was half lidded. Sitting with his legs folded and his cloak spread behind him, Japheth placed the Dreamheart so its gaze faced the damp cavity's far wall. He wasn't ready to look into that awful pupil quite yet. Touching the stone calmed his shaking hands, but its slick warmth wound his nerves more tightly.

The warlock glanced around one last time. Still no sign of Anusha. Good. He took a deep breath and then placed both hands back on the object. Its mere presence was an affront to the natural order of Toril, and touching it felt like touching a dragon's oily scales.

The stone attempted to twist the mind of any creature that remained too long in its presence, even as it offered the promise of real power. It opened new vistas of perception and possibility with skin-on-stone contact, but they were only reflexive responses, part and parcel of the Dreamheart's alien nature.

Japheth's task required that he reach deeper and find a spark of sentience with whom he could bargain. Taking advantage of the surface energy that boiled off the Dreamheart would grant potent abilities, as the kuo-toa Nogah had demonstrated. But without the strictures of a pact to protect the wielder, such power would eventually corrupt and control the holder of the stone. And the stone

would always be required in order to call upon the abilities so gained.

Japheth knew how to avoid that outcome for himself. He hoped.

He turned the relic around and looked into its eye.

The lid slowly pulled back to the accompaniment of grating stone. The unmasked pupil revealed an unblinking regard. Within its darkness, Japheth discerned tiny, dancing shapes.

He squinted, trying to understand what he was seeing. Little diamonds shining amid blackness... were they stars?

Yes. He observed a swathe of stars burning in unthinkable multitudes beyond the world.

Japheth had thought the world vast, but the stars he saw in the Dreamheart reached as far beyond the sky's illusory vault as a millennium stretched beyond an hour.

His gaze was absorbed by the delicate, twinkling points. His mind flashed out into the emptiness between them.

First euphoria washed through him. The stars were like jewels. Many of them shone in costly colors, and he floated in their treasury. Existence stretched away past all imagination, yet he felt—at least in that instant—as if he might have some inkling of its vastness.

Then he noticed a few stars were not like their sisters. They wavered and danced, as if their place in the heavens was unfixed. Seeing the inconstant lamps reminded Japheth of his purpose.

When he realized the irregular pinpricks of light were less like stars and more like windows piercing the sky, a tendril of nausea touched him. A fell radiance leaked from the portholes, and behind them, dread silhouettes huddled close, peering down into reality.

Somehow, perhaps by mediation of the Dreamheart, he knew the names of the stars.

There was Acamar the corpse star whose immense size sent other stars spiraling to their doom. Caiphon was the purple star, appearing in the guise of a guide point, but he viscerally knew it was capable of betraying those who relied upon it too much.

There was Delban with its ice white glare, cruel and bitter.

Khirad was a star of piercing blue light that burned over apocalypses wherever they occurred.

These stars and many more Japheth saw and recognized.

The warlock blanched. He saw where he had to go if he was to swear a new pact to the nameless entities whose lineage included the Eldest, though he was unclear of the hierarchy. If his broken pact with the Lord of Bats could be called a fey pact because of Neifion's home in Faerie, then he supposed the one he contemplated now could be called a star pact because the entities he courted lived far beyond the world.

He would have to steel his mind against the journey lest he emerge more a servant to his new patrons than he ever was to Neifion, even when the Lord of Bats had briefly possessed Japheth's pact stone. It would all be for nothing if he toppled, glare-eyed and drool-speckled, into the clutch of mad gods. That outcome would be as bad as or worse than letting the crimson dust have him.

But even should the worst come to pass, he told himself it would be worth it if he could at least help Anusha.

He could at least get her out of Xxiphu before the consequences of his newest spectacularly bad decision claimed his soul. Probably.

Japheth allowed his point of view to be caught in the subtle current of the closest star, whose light was red. It pulled him closer, and its name came to him unbidden. Nihal.

The other stars whose names had occurred to him each pulled at his mind, altering his trajectory somewhat

through the faux heavens of his conception. But it was the star Nihal whose authority most firmly grasped him.

Nihal writhed around the fixed space it should have maintained, its influence pulling Japheth nearer and nearer.

The moment before it sucked him in, the warlock screamed. The star's image changed from a cinder red fist to that of a humanoid-shaped hole in reality filled with writhing red maggots.

He flashed into a blaring space filled with sliding worms. He lost all sense of his body—limbless and formless, Japheth was helpless in the grasp of a worm-filled, churning expanse. But he continued to move. Something drew him forward, he was actually accelerating through the horrorscape. Awful sounds smashed at his eardrums. The noise was the sound of world-sized maggots scraping against each other accompanied by a vague, atonal melody. The ghastly sound concentrated all the primal, ultimate instability that lay beneath matter and behind time. Its declaration promised an unutterable and unendurable vision. Screaming, Japheth plunged into it.

"That's it, then," Anusha whispered. Yeva shrugged.

Ahead, the narrow asymmetrical tunnel opened into a larger corridor. From their vantage, the path seemed only a fifth the size of the great spiraling thoroughfare she and Yeva had trudged up after leaving the orrery. The lane was empty save for an irregularly gusting wind that rushed down its length every few moments. Purple flames burning on the crowns of stone obelisks marked the recent passage of an aboleth lamplighter.

"An important corridor, but not one frequently used by the awakened," Anusha said. "I hope."

Yeva didn't even bother to lift her shoulders. She merely said, "Let's go back and collect the warlock. We will learn how little used this way is then."

Anusha swallowed a terse comeback. She knew the woman wasn't trying to be cruel—she merely had little use for speculation. She just wished Yeva's attitude toward Japheth hadn't turned from acceptance to disdain when they learned his powers had been stripped. Yeva only cared about Japheth's ability to fashion a new focus for her spirit.

"Yes, that's true," Anusha said. "Let's hope I'm right."

They retreated back down the meandering nest of tunnels, avoiding those with encrustations of frozen memory, quivering egg sacks, and small aboleths already squirming. Some of the little monsters were far more aggressive than their siblings—and cannibalistic. On the way up, they'd chanced across an aboleth feeding frenzy. Anusha was glad for once to have left her body behind. Otherwise she would have been violently sick.

They reached the lone tunnel that spiraled down to where the warlock rested. A glimmer of red light played up the burrow.

"Looks like the warlock got bored," Yeva said. "If he's not careful, he'll draw a newly hatched clutch down on him. If he hasn't already." Concern tightened Anusha's throat. She hurried down the passage. Yeva followed.

They found Japheth sleeping at the tunnel's dead end, right where they'd left him. Anusha could see the rise and fall of his chest as the warlock slumbered. She was relieved he wasn't shaking as he'd been when they'd left.

"Where did the light go?" Yeva said.

The woman was right—somewhere in their rush down the tunnel, the flickering glow visible at the mouth had faded. They regarded the unmoving man only in the light of Anusha's dream sword.

"Japheth," Anusha said as she bent and touched the man's shoulder. "Are you awake? We're back."

The man's breathing changed and he opened his eyes. His slightly curled form unwound as he sat up.

Anusha gasped. Japheth's gaze was as clear and dark as when she'd first met him.

"Japheth? What's happened? The stain of the dust is gone. I didn't think that was possible..."

The warlock looked around with bemusement written across his face. He cocked his head as if trying to recall a favorite lyric.

Seeing his dark brown irises was wonderful. Anusha suddenly realized he couldn't see her, especially if his vision wasn't stained crimson.

She willed herself visible. The warlock immediately focused on her.

"Your eyes," said Anusha, reaching for his brow. "They're —"

The Dreamheart fell from Japheth's hands. He'd been holding it behind an obscuring fold of his cloak.

The sphere dropped only a few inches because Japheth was sitting on the ground, but the sound it made hitting the floor was like a sarcophagus's stone lid slamming shut.

Anusha couldn't contain a cry of alarm. The Dreamheart bounced once, then rolled to the center of the niche and stopped dead like a piece of metal on a lodestone.

Japheth said, his voice far away, "I had a dream the stars spoke my name..."

The man's gaze tracked down to the Dreamheart. Incredulity swept his features. He reached out and, with a fold of his cloak, encapsulated the sphere. With a shake of his hand and a flourish of the shadowy garment, the awful thing was gone.

"What were you doing with that? Were you holding it?" Anusha finally managed. The mere glimpse of the stone pained her. The psychic current flowing through Xxiphu seemed to tug and pull on her skin.

Japheth bent his head down to one hand and massaged his forehead for a moment. Then his hand dropped to his side and he said, "I found a way to reclaim my power,

Anusha. A way that doesn't rely on the Lord of Bats. My spells... well, some old and many new... are mine to cast once more." He smiled.

Yeva said, "What was the stone you were holding? Does that have anything to do with your reclaimed powers?"

"I used it as a key to find them, yes."

"Then you are tainted, human," Yeva said. "Even without my body, I could smell the stink of corruption on the orb you hid in your cloak. I'm surprised the aboleths haven't already turned you into one of their slime-fleshed servitors."

Japheth looked uncertain, but he shook his head. "A reckoning may eventually find me, true enough. When I sought to swear a new pact..."

The man's eyes narrowed. He shook his head as if to jar loose an unpleasant memory and said, "But that's just one possible future. Right now, the important thing is that I have reclaimed my spells and rituals. I have power enough to release Anusha's mind from the Eldest. And perhaps enough to tie your spirit to a body that can hold it without Anusha's constant maintenance."

"When?" Yeva said, hope naked in her voice.

"As soon as we free Anusha's dream and clear out of here."

Anusha didn't know how to react. She regarded the revitalized warlock. His rejuvenation seemed too good to be true, like she had slipped into a daydream and just hadn't realized it yet.

Of course, finding Japheth clutching one of the Eldest's eyes in his sleep like a stuffed child's toy wasn't really the definition of too good. It was the same relic that sucked her mind into Xxiphu in the first place! She watched Japheth, trying to discern any change in him from his contact with the relic. Had he really sworn a pact with it?

The man stood up and shook out his cloak. The sick trembling that had invaded his limbs was gone, as if it had never been. The set of his shoulders was as wide and

commanding as she'd thought them when she'd trailed Japheth unseen through the streets of New Sarshel so long before. And his eyes were lucid and unmistakably clear of the least residue of the terrible dust he'd indulged overlong. "You've sworn a new pact," she said. "To the Eldest?" The psychic undertow strengthened around her.

"No," he said, his tone definitive. "I've sworn to entities beyond the world of men and monsters—and aboleths who've outlived their time like the Eldest. I have sworn a pact to the undying stars." He looked up, and Anusha followed his gaze. The only thing above them was the blank, damp rock face of the cavity. Japheth continued to gaze at the ceiling as if he could see through the rock and all the earth between him and the empty sky over Faerun.

"I don't understand," Anusha said. "How can the stars offer you power? And... how are mere points of light able to relieve you of your addiction to traveler's dust?"

"Also," Yeva broke in, "if you claim your spells now flow from celestial objects, why did we find you with your hands wrapped around the petrified eye of the Eldest? Are you trying to suggest there is no connection whatever?"

"Honestly, that troubles me too," Anusha said. "I'm sorry to keep pressing you on this, but just what role did the Dreamheart play in your rejuvenation?" She ignored the invisible tide that surged all around her, willing herself to remain in place and focus on the warlock's words.

Japheth raised his hands, a placatory smile on his face. "No need to apologize, it's a fair concern. I'd have the same. It's hard to explain to someone not versed in arcana, but mainly I needed a catalyst. Some arcane source of power I could use to unlock the spells I once enjoyed thanks to Neifion. The Dreamheart provided that. But to answer Yeva's earlier question: Yes. A tiny thread of connection has been forged between myself and the master of Xxiphu."

Anusha retreated a step. The tide seemed to froth and bubble around her. She was surprised the others couldn't

see and feel it.

“Japheth,” she said, “I—”

“Listen!” he said. “I did not give up my independence! I remain my own man. Yes, the Eldest served as the conduit for finding my new pact, but that’s all. The Eldest doesn’t even know I exist. Moreover... the tiny connection I do share will help me find your focus in the creature’s mind.” He looked at Anusha, his face beseeching. “Find it, and free you from all this. And perhaps Yeva too.”

So many battling impulses occupied Anusha, she couldn’t honestly say how she felt. And the influence pulling at her wasn’t making it any easier to think!

It horrified her that Japheth would bind himself to the very thing trying to consume her soul. But seeing him standing, clear eyed and in command of his body—and apparently flush once again with potent magic... she couldn’t deny it fueled a tiny flame of hope.

“Anusha?” he asked, and held out his hand. “Take me to the Eldest, and I will remove your focus from its mind.

But we must be quick. Each hour that passes, more and more of its scattered thoughts return to it. Soon the dreaming thing will rouse, and then it’ll be too late.”

Anusha exclaimed in dismay, “The tide has me again!”

Yeva leaped for Anusha and grasped her arm. But the mottled woman’s own flesh began to steam, on the verge of falling into so many formless motes.

Japheth’s eyes widened. He lunged, but his hands passed through her. Anusha felt herself being swept away, just as she had been on the balcony.

The warlock said, “Not again!” and uttered a series of syllables, each one forming a pulse of blue light. The points of illumination spun themselves into a chain of light that snapped around her and Yeva.

The crashing blare of the undertow instantly quieted. Anusha imagined she felt the solid floor of the tunnel

beneath her feet once more. Yeva's skin and clothing ceased their dissipation.

"That..." said Japheth, "was close."

The ephemeral cord of light faded away, but the psychic undercurrent remained bearable. However, it was not gone.

Anusha shuddered, then took a deep breath. The warlock couldn't have shown her any more clearly that he retained his mind. If he hadn't taken his new pact, she'd have been no more.

More than anything else, she just wanted to believe him. In the end, that moved her more than reason or odds.

She took his hand, imagining hers solid enough for him to hold. He said, "I can only hold you back for a little while."

"Then come," Anusha said. "Yeva and I found a route out of the nursery."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Lower Capital

Raidon advanced down a rounded tunnel, Angul naked in one hand. His Cerulean Sign insulated his mind against the sword's overweening ego. Mostly.

Silvery grass filled the corridor, growing on the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling. It was like grass in shape only, the blades seemed slightly metallic. When a peculiar wind gusted down the corridor every few spans, the rustling blades made a sound like the ringing of thousands of tiny bells.

Seren and Thoster walked abreast a few feet behind the monk's lead. Four crew brought up the rear.

Thoster absentmindedly clutched at the amulet hanging over his coat.

Seren's fist was tight around her wand. Instead of the white sari and sandals she normally wore, the wizard was dressed in a heavy red robe and black boots.

Raidon had noted the wardrobe change, but made no comment.

When they came to an intersection, Raidon paused. He turned and said, "Let's take a moment before we continue."

"Sounds good," said Thoster. The man requested a pack from one of the crew and opened it. He produced biscuits and watered wine and shared them around.

"Hey, Seren," said the captain as everyone nibbled on their small repast, "I was meaning to ask you before... what's with the red?"

Everyone turned to watch the wizard.

Seren said, "My regular clothes are too light for trudging into who knows what we'll find in here. This old robe is much better suited for tunnel crawling."

“Really? Because if I just ran into you on the street and didn’t know any better, I’d think you were a Red Wizard.”

Raidon realized Thoster was right. She was accoutred just like one of that feared arcane order.

Seren frowned. “Don’t worry about it. I happen to like the color red.”

Thoster chuckled. “Oh, that’s rich.”

Seren said, “Don’t make me regret helping you earlier, Captain.”

Thoster raised a hand in surrender.

“Anyway” Seren said, “I am a Red Wizard, even if Thay wants me dead and the others won’t have me. I didn’t choose to leave the fold, they left me! So... get used to it, Thoster. And you too, Raidon. I’m not going to hide who I am any longer.”

The captain said, “Yeah, but a Red—”

Seren interrupted, “Maybe you should consider following my lead, Captain.”

Thoster’s face colored. He suddenly seemed very interested in his biscuit.

Raidon knew he was seeing the surface of some secret the wizard and the captain shared. And he supposed the wizard was suffering from some sort of personal trial, probably brought to a head by their run-in with the bounty hunter. He considered digging deeper to find out what it all portended. It bothered him that he wasn’t more interested.

It is unimportant, sent Angul. Our quest takes precedence.

Raidon agreed. He swallowed the last of his small meal and stood, brushing his hands on his coat. “Let’s go.”

The vegetation thickened as they moved deeper into Xxiphu, becoming denser and higher. Finally Raidon was wading through growth that reached his waist. Each step was something of a struggle.

It reminded him of a time, back before the Spellplague, when he'd taken little Ailyn out to the country to enjoy the day. How she'd loved running through the long grass in the meadow. She would get lost in it, but jump every so often just high enough—

"This route you've selected for us, my Shou friend," said Thoster, "puts me in mind of a three-legged cat on deck during high seas."

"I don't even know what that means," muttered Seren.

Raidon paused, allowing the wisps of his past to evaporate. He said over his shoulder, "It looks as if the grass thins out ahead. Regardless, I sense this is the quickest way to the Eldest. This is the way we proceed."

The captain swept off his hat and executed a mock bow, his face just avoiding the top of the grass. "After you." Raidon didn't waste breath telling the captain he could return to his ship if he was unhappy with their route. He resumed trudging down the vegetated corridor.

The Cerulean Sign reacted strongly to the grass—but it reacted nearly as strongly to the stone walls of the corridor and even the air. In Xxiphu, few things were not tainted.

As the half-elf promised, the grass thinned out, coinciding with a widening in the corridor. A silver bulb sprouted in the center of the area from a particularly thick piece of grass... actually more like a stem than a blade. The pod was just larger than a man, though its exact dimensions were not fixed, it gradually thickened and thinned, contorting like quicksilver in slow motion. Raidon saw his features distorted in the bulb's undulating body. He concentrated on it to the exclusion of everything else, and the Cerulean Sign cooled.

"Stay clear of the bulb," Raidon said. "It's possibly dangerous."

"Hells, do you really think so?" said Thoster. "I thought it was just a boil on a halfling's ass."

Raidon's back muscles twitched, a movement too small for anyone else to notice. The captain's constant wisecrack comments were beginning to wear on him. He knew the privateer was being willfully facetious, but he replied anyway, "If you value your life, stay clear. I sense this growth is set here as a sentry—it's not a random weed."

So saying, Raidon began to edge around the expanded space in the corridor, giving the bulb as wide a berth as he could.

Seren moved to emulate him. "At least the grass is shorter here," she said.

Thoster chuckled to himself a moment, then followed. The crew member "volunteers" brought up the rear.

Halfway around the chamber, the Sign's temperature dropped more precipitously.

The monk had the distinct sense through the spellscar that something abominable approached from the direction they were headed. Raidon held up his hand, calling a halt. He looked back to make eye contact with the others and put a finger of his other hand to his lips. He hoped the captain would refrain from his mocking comments, if just this once.

A scraping, belling cacophony issued down the tunnel. It sounded like silvery grass being shoved aside in a wide swathe.

Raidon could just make out a shape lumbering toward them, but the reflective vegetation still hid its exact nature.

Seren began to chant arcane syllables. He heard the captain draw his golemwork blade. Raidon readied himself to slay whatever threatened their progress with the eager length of Angul.

The shape crested the last of the high, silvery blades. It was an aboleth the size of a chariot.

Thoster said, "Blood!"

The aboleth's five scattered, red eyes rotated in their sockets to focus on the invaders. A mucous haze engulfed

Raidon. The smell was overwhelming. He heard Seren gag and cough, losing her spell before she could release it.

Angul flared. The thin coating of slime that had misted across the sword and Raidon burned away in a puff of steam. The words "Aberrations shall be purged*dropped from Raidon's lips before he realized the sword had got its hooks into him again.

Not that it mattered. The aboleth would be purged.

Raidon leaped. Rather, he tried to. Instead, he fell onto his elbows when his feet failed to leave the ground.

Several dozen silvery blades had wrapped around his calves without his notice.

Thoster called, "The grass is alive!"

A sharp tug around the monk's ankles pulled him closer to the center of the tunnel, where the mirrorlike pod undulated. He saw that besides himself, Thoster and two of the crew were similarly ensnared. Even as he watched, the sinuous grass transferred one of the screaming crew members to the globe. The pod languidly nodded down on its stem as if to deliver a blank-faced kiss to the flailing figure being dragged tait.

The moment one of the man's thrashing arms touched the pod, a shiny tide rushed to cover the crew member's entire body, cutting off his screams. Not even a boot or grasping hand protruded a heartbeat later. The pod lazily resumed its former upright position at the end of its stalk, still thickening and thinning, though perhaps slightly larger than it had been. Other than that, there was no evidence that a man's life had just been snuffed out. Raidon used the Blade Cerulean to cut the strands tangling his legs. He snapped to his feet.

"Cut the stalk," Seren yelled, pointing at the bulb.

Kill the aboleth, Angul urged, pulling him around to face the malevolent watcher.

Raidon charged the aboleth.

It vomited a fist of slime that whined past his head.

His advance was slowed by the rippling grass, which kept tripping him. He managed to avoid most of the blades, but not all. His attack failed several paces short of punching the blade through the aboleth's belly.

Instead, he was forced to use Angul to cut away the sea of entangling, angry blades that writhed around him like a nest of headless hydras.

The aboleth's eyes tracked him. He felt their malign power attempting to burrow into his brain and overwrite it with new thoughts and new goals.

Raidon shook off the influence. His mind was too well schooled to be suborned. Or perhaps it was the Blade Cerulean, who didn't like competitors.

Fending off a tentacle slap with a savage cut from Angul, he advanced once more. He managed to pare away one of the aboleth's tentacles. The creature didn't seem to care that one of its four limbs lay severed and squirming in the grass. It was as if the aboleth had no fear for its own safety.

Not that Angul cared either, for considerations of defense or even caution. By extension, neither did Raidon.

The haze surrounding the creature pulsed, becoming momentarily thick as mud. Then it sleeted everything in glistening slime the color of bilge water and no less smelly. He heard the shouts of his compatriots, caught in the same ooze burst.

Raidon found himself slimed under a layer of hardening muck that sought to immobilize him, making him once again easy prey for the silvery grass.

The monk put his free hand to his chest and summoned energy from the Cerulean Sign. A blaze of pure blue light burst from it. The illumination shattered the hardening shell of slime.

Even as the aboleth tried to blink the afterimage of the cerulean light from its five eyes, Raidon crossed the final distance between them. He slid the entire length of Angul into the aboleth's brain.

The aboleth's death gurgle rattled down the corridor. Raidon pulled Angul free. The blade burned the creature's nasty blood from its length with a sheet of fire.

"Hey, Raidon, some help, eh?"

He turned.

Thoster remained caught in the entangling grass. The privateer was half again as close to the pod as he'd started.

A coating of hardened slime resisted the man's every move. The captain slashed his clicking sword to sever strands of grass, but for every strand he cut, two more twined around him.

Seren had enshrouded herself in a translucent globe of protective spell light. The defensive magic had apparently shielded her from the ooze burst and—so far, at least—resisted the increasingly frantic attempts of the silvery blades to penetrate it. He could hear her chanting the arcane precursors to another spell.

Of the crew, only a single struggling woman remained. Raidon saw it was Mharsan, Thoster's newest first mate.

Blood streaked her legs where the cruel blades cut deep in their attempt to pull her toward a quicksilver embrace.

The bulb now measured more than twice its original diameter. The slow waves washing across its surface continued unabated.

Raidon moved to destroy the pod, but lurched to a stop. The grass had caught him again when he'd stopped to kill the aboleth. He bent, once again bringing Angul to bear.

Seren finished her spell. She lobbed a tiny sphere of pulsating white light through the golden glow of her ward.

The ball traced a perfect arc through the air to meet the pod. As with the crew members, the silvery mass absorbed the light the moment contact was made.

The bulb stopped undulating. It emitted a gasp of intestinal distress from an orifice Raidon couldn't discern.

Then it exploded, bathing the tunnel in a rain of silvery fluid.

“Oh goody, more goo,” said Thoster. The blades of grass holding Raidon fell limp. The silvery vegetation lining the passage wilted in a widening ripple. The tinkling of bells ceased, leaving only the sound of the captain’s ongoing litany of sarcastic curses and the surviving crew member’s hoarse breathing to fill the air.

“The sentry is dead,” Raidon said, “as is the aboleth. We should go, before others come to investigate.”

Thoster pulled himself to his feet using his sword as a crutch. Drooping filaments of grass loosed their hold on his legs. Then the captain yelped in alarm. A glob of the silvery fluid smoldered on his jacket. The man ripped off the fancy black coat and threw it to the ground. In hardly any time, the entire jacket was consumed by the acidic residue.

Everyone spent a moment looking at their own clothing and skin to make certain no other spatters from the bulb had found them.

Raidon noticed many of the bandages beneath Thoster’s torn shirt had been ripped loose in his struggle with the voracious vegetation. What he could see of the man’s abdomen and chest, and even upper arms, was covered in grayish green scales. Scales that reminded him of something he’d normally see at the end of a fishing line.

“What is wrong with your skin, Thoster?” said Raidon.

The captain’s eyes went wide. He glanced at the wizard and then back at the monk.

Seren said, “He suffers from... a curse. It’s something I’ve been helping him deal with. I’m surprised this is the moment you’ve chosen to notice our captain’s distress. Perhaps you should reconsider your priorities. We just lost three of Green Siren’s crew!”

They are unimportant, said Angul.

The half-elf gritted his teeth and waited for a twinge of guilt, but none came. He sheathed his sword. He felt as hollow as ever.

. Raidon shook his head and said, “I’m sorry.”

Seren's face was tight, as if she wanted to make an issue of Raidon's lack of empathy, but she remained silent.

He turned back to Thoster. "I am sorry, Captain, for the loss of even more of your crew."

The captain grimaced and said, "They'll be missed, aye."

"But," continued Raidon, "why do you have kuo-toa scales covering you? My Sign is tingling ever so slightly at your presence. Why?"

"I... I have a condition," the man finally said. "Seren's stopped its progression, though." The captain lifted his amulet and showed the monk.

Raidon reached out with his mind through the Cerulean Sign.

As before, the overwhelming influence of the surrounding city made it difficult to discern fine details. Still, he was able to see Thoster was lightly touched with an aberrant taint. It wasn't especially strong, but it bore watching. His skill with the Sign wasn't sufficient for him to tell if the amulet in the man's hand was indeed holding the condition in check.

He turned to Seren and said, "Is it a curse? Can't you just remove it?"

The wizard shrugged. She said, "Most times, a curse will melt your skin or make it diseased, or something else vile. Thoster's 'curse' wasn't one he gained recently. It is bred into him, but only recently triggered. It is slowly transforming him into a marine creature."

"A kuo-toa," said Raidon.

Seren said, "Could be. I don't really know the specifics. Nor does he."

The half-elf regarded Thoster. "How do you feel? Any urge to fall in with these aboleths?"

The captain chuckled and shook his head. "No, 'fraid not. Though I do feel a sort of... current? Like a tide coming in."

"A tide you can resist?"

The captain nodded. "My mind is my own, even if my body seems stuck between human and fish." He held out his

amulet. "Seren's amulet is my anchor. I haven't grown a single new scale since she fashioned this for me back on the ship."

Raidon studied the man's face. He judged Thoster believed he spoke the truth.

"The world is a wide place," the captain continued. Thoster had regained his equilibrium. "There's room in it for all sorts. Even someone like me. Hells, I might prove more useful in this quest—I got an inside perspective on what fish folk think."

"Perhaps so," said Raidon. "At least I saved my hat," said Thoster. He reached up and adjusted the great black thing still stuck on his head.

"We'll revisit this topic later, once I've slain the Eldest," Raidon decided. He drew Angul and faced down the tunnel.

"Sure, unless we're all dead," Seren said.

They moved deeper into the city, angling inward and upward at every opportunity. On more than one occasion they detoured around encrustations of translucent ice. Seren said she could see people inside.

"People?" inquired Thoster.

"More like images of people..." Seren trailed off as her eyes widened. She ran a finger across the ice slab that roughly coated one side of the tunnel. She shook her head. "It's more like frozen dew."

"Dew? Condensed from what?"

"From the memories of a sleeping god perhaps. The, um, Eldest. These images are memories that have settled out of its petrified consciousness and, in the process, caught up any creature whose nightmares swerved too close."

Thoster whistled. He said, "So, we should avoid sleeping in Xxiphu."

Seren blinked as if the idea hadn't occurred to her. Then she nodded emphatically.

Raidon motioned for the others to follow him. There was no time to study the phenomenon and determine whether Seren was right about the ice. He and Angul were in agreement—events were too close to disaster to waste time sightseeing.

Still, Raidon worried he was forgetting something. The enthusiasm of the Blade Cerulean seemed ideal for this stage of their attack on the Eldest, but part of him wondered if he wasn't being too hasty. Shouldn't he have been more suspicious of Thoster's unsettling skin condition?

In any other circumstance, Angul would have happily obliged such a request. Thoster engaged in just the sort of seemingly inconsequential, petty crime that used to drive the weapon to feats of righteous vindictiveness. But Thoster, no matter the source of his strange curse, couldn't hold a candle to the burning forest Xxiphu represented.

Nothing else really mattered to Angul save finding and ending one of greatest banes ever to threaten Faerun.

Not that Angul cared a fig for the world.

Raidon was aware the sword influenced him more than he'd normally allow. The clarity, warmth, and comfort streaming from the hilt was his first clue. The half-elf was disciplined enough to disentangle himself from those emotions and keep them separate from his core self. But to say Angul's persuasion was having no effect would be a lie.

On the other hand, like the soul-forged weapon, Raidon himself was a servitor of the Cerulean Sign that blazoned his chest. With the Sign's energies enlivening the monk's mind and body, he and Angul were far more aligned in philosophy than he cared to admit.

It was the Cerulean Sign that pulled him forward now, not Angul, for all its sky-burning bluster. In a sense, he had become a living manifestation of the Sign.

The corridor opened into a larger space.

Raidon continued forward without taking the time to reconnoiter. He found himself on the periphery of a circular

grotto that smelled unpleasantly of herb and copper. Several other corridors fed into the same chamber.

Thin yellow vines grew across the naked stone of the curved walls. The tangled vines resembled arteries bulging just beneath skin. Indeed, they slowly pulsed with dark fluid. Here and there along each vine, red leathery fruits sprouted. Most were the size of fists, but a few were ripe and heavy with growth. These were closer in size to a man curled in a fetal position. Raidon didn't let that last comparison go unmarked, but the central features of the grotto claimed his attention.

A perfectly circular pool occupied about two-thirds of the chamber's floor space. Stone obelisks clustered around the pool, each burning with a purplish flame. Mucus trails coated the floor of the chamber around the pool in thin streaks, emerging from one tunnel, circling the pool, then leading out into one of the other tunnels.

Raidon stepped up to the water and peered in. Or perhaps it wasn't water—a crystal clear liquid lapped slowly against the edges of its containment, more like gel than anything else. But whether it was water or slime, phosphorescent images played out in the pool's depths. Images that didn't seem dissimilar to the visions his Sign had given him on occasion. Seren and Thoster joined the monk at the pool's edge. Both studied the confusing welter of lines and shapes of dull green and orange light visible in the fluid. Mharsan, the first mate, remained in the tunnel entrance.

"I can't make any sense of it," said Thoster. He turned away to look at one of the larger vine fruits. A worried frown grew on his face.

Seren wrinkled her brow but continued to watch the pool. "Do these glowing lights hold any meaning for you?" she asked the half-elf.

"Yes," admitted Raidon. Against Angul's stern insistence, he sheathed the blade. The moment the hilt left his grip, the

monk sighed.

“What?” said Seren.

Instead of explaining, he pointed into the pool with one hand and lay the palm of his other hand flat across the Sign.

“This is some sort of meeting chamber. Were Xxiphu completely awake, this grotto would be swimming in aboleths.”

“Auspicious that everyone is still asleep,” said Seren.

“Or otherwise occupied,” said Raidon. “Ah yes. I can sort order from this chaos with the Cerulean Sign, enough so you can see too.”

He concentrated. The jumble of mismatched lines came together, creating a stylized image of a broad pillar.

Within the pillar were packed lines, tubes, and spaces of all sizes.

“I see it! Is it an image of the city?” said Seren.

“Yes. Xxiphu. See there?” He pointed to the base of the wavering picture. A large space filled the entire lower fifth of the column. A convoluted series of spheres rotated around still larger spheres. One massive globe appeared to hover within the very center of the cavity.

“What is it? It looks like an orrery without the arms.”

“I don’t know what it looks like in reality,” said Raidon, “but by this simplified depiction and a sense I get from the Cerulean Sign, it is some kind of font of arcane magic.”

Thoster walked back up and gazed at the reconstructed image revealed in the pool. He asked, “What are those tiny little colored things flying around the spheres?”

Raidon concentrated his attention on one of the points the captain indicated. They came in all colors, though there were more red and blue points than any other.

The half-elf’s eyes widened.

“Aboleths!”

Seren sucked in her breath. “Are they really flying?”

Raidon slowly nodded. “The spheres apparently grant that power—at least the smallest ones. The largest orbs...

could lift something far larger than even a very big aboleth.”

“Like a kraken maybe?” volunteered Thoster.

Raidon nodded, remembering Gethshemeth. But he suspected the black sphere around which all the smaller ones ultimately rotated could achieve something even grander... assuming conferring flight was its true function.

The monk wondered if, from this... council chamber, he could affect the connection of a given aboleth with the arcane power source and perhaps sever its ability to keep to the air. It seemed as if the functions were there, if he could devote enough time to its study.

“What’s most important at the moment,” he said aloud, “is that we can use this pool to track aboleths.” Raidon focused his attention higher in the column. The tumbling spheres were impressive, but not relevant to their purpose.

“Where are we on this schematic?” said Seren. “We docked fairly high up, right? Though we don’t know how tall the city really is since the top was punched into solid stone...”

Raidon didn’t answer directly, but slowly traced a finger up the side of the glowing map, his fingertip only inches above the pool. Doing so seemed to aid his concentration. As his finger moved, the area on the diagram near it came into better focus, while areas beyond blurred into far less detail. He was searching for the Eldest.

He discovered more and more points of abolethic light as he tracked upward through Xxiphu’s lower and central foundations. He found a particularly dense concentration of smaller, pale lights in a tangled maze of narrow tunnels about halfway up Xxiphu. Within the tangle, a couple of points pulsed with particularly fell light that outshone all the aboleths he’d so far detected. The two were clearly powerful entities... but they didn’t seem to be aboleths. When he tried to focus his attention even closer, he was

unable to get a positive fix on them. But neither was the Eldest. He moved on.

Above the maze, and moving steadily higher, he found another odd point of light. It seemed to pulse between great power and near extinction with heartbeat regularity. Raidon concentrated, then said, "Xiang's Seven Principles, that's Japheth!"

Seren's mouth dropped open.

The monk turned to regard Thoster. "You were right!"

The captain raised his hands in an elaborate shrug. He said, "You don't get to captain a ship like Green Siren if you can't make a few lucky guesses."

Raidon frowned. "This is a complication we do not need. Especially if he carries the Dreamheart with him on his ill-considered foray."

"Is he close to us?" said Seren.

Raidon resumed his study of the pool's schematic. He found where Japheth's soul light glimmered again, then carefully continued his search up the length of the great city.

"Yes," the monk said a moment later, pointing to a small chamber.

"We are here."

"No more than a few hand spans from where you detected the warlock," mused the captain. His voice held a tentative note.

Raidon said, "Yes. And see how many of the tunnels below converge here? If he continues his current heading, Japheth will come to this room eventually, perhaps in less than an hour. I sense no aboleths between him and us.

In fact, this whole upper area seems remarkably clear of the monsters..."

The half-elf raised his attention to the final fifth of the great spire-shaped city of Xxiphu. He sucked in his breath.

The empty cavity that crowned the city nearly matched the one at its base, at least in size. Within it, dozens of

abolethic lights burned, several of them far brighter than the ones he'd spied lower down. Probably old and potent aboleths who'd wakened early. The disturbing thing was how they were arranged in a great circle, a shape whose arcane significance was not lost on the monk. The circle of aboleths slowly rotated, hovering some distance over the great chamber's floor.

"They're performing some sort of ritual," Seren murmured.

The magical reproduction in the pool showed how each aboleth brightened in turn, then dimmed as its fellow brightened, as if passing along some sort of charged object or concept. The pulse continued around the circle until a full revolution was achieved. The last creature in the ring directed the gathered energy to the roof of the chamber. Then the strangely regular dance of light began anew.

By process of elimination, Raidon knew what he would find when he concentrated his attention on the diagram's apex.

Upon Xxiphu's crown brooded the very absence of light. A dark, yawning emptiness there ate everything the creatures below were able to throw at it, leaving it hungry for more.

The Sign on his chest was so cold he lost feeling in his body. The vacuity could be none other than the Eldest, his foe, who sat the entire city as if it were no more than a throne.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Gallery of Seeing

"No more dallying," said Raidon. "I'm going to the apex and putting an end to this."

Seren's pulse beat visibly in her neck. The captain's breath came quicker.

"You two stay here and waylay Japheth when he comes through."

Seren gasped. "What?"

"The idiot warlock presumably has the Dreamheart with him. I can't imagine how else he could have found Xxiphu without its guidance."

"What does it matter now? You said the Dreamheart had lost its significance," said Seren.

Raidon said, "To put it simply, I don't want the relic and the Eldest to come back together."

Thoster said, "So the stone still has some power after all?" Raidon gave a half shrug. He said, "Yes, the Dreamheart is invested with a portion of the Eldest's power. The relic has been in constant usage since Nogah stole it. The more it was used, the more it drew from the quiescent Eldest into itself. Though the relic's theft may be responsible for prodding the Eldest from its deepest slumber, the stone's subsequent and continued separation may be the only reason the Eldest hasn't already opened all its eyes. The Dreamheart sapped too much of the Eldest's essence, or at least its ability to regain consciousness.

Why else this elaborate ritual the pool reveals?"

The wizard said, "That... is entirely possible. The flow of magic and influence can cut both ways. How ironic."

"Even more ironic that Japheth is here just now," said Raidon, "with the Dreamheart in hand, apparently oblivious

that the aboleths are waiting for him at Xxiphu's apex. He bears a terrible gift they are eager to accept.

If he delivers the Dreamheart to the Eldest, nothing will keep it bound."

"Seren and I can stop the warlock and take the Dreamheart from him," Thoster said. The man looked visibly determined, more so than the monk had ever seen him. But his features also bore the slightest touch of doubt.

"Good," Raidon said, "though I advise not touching the stone directly. Watch his approach through the pool— he'll be here soon if he keeps his current pace."

"We'll stop him," Seren said. Then her face pinched as if forcing out her next words. "You're sure you won't need help up there?" She waved vaguely toward the ceiling.

Raidon moved to the exit that the schematic showed spiraled in an almost direct route to the upper cavity. He said, "Thanks for your offer, Seren, but it's better you stop and hold the Dreamheart here "

"Very well. But don't sacrifice yourself, do you hear? I mean to collect what you promised when this is all over."

Raidon surprised himself by laughing. "I will endeavor to stay safe."

Encrustations of ice coated the tunnel ahead of Raidon. It wasn't so thick it blocked his way, but it promised to be a tight squeeze.

The monk approached cautiously and angled his body to slip between two frosted glacier faces. Sidestepping through the narrow vent, he paused and looked into the ice. It seemed empty...

Raidon drew on the Cerulean Sign, asking it to supply him with sight sufficient to see what was tainted.

His eyes widened. He saw that Seren's earlier exclamation about the ice holding people was true. Raidon saw people of many races caught like flies in amber. And young ones too. He winced and looked away.

A child's piping laughter sounded from somewhere ahead. He started, then said, "Who's there?"

More laughter echoed down the cold vent, more distant than before. It was the innocent sound of a small girl— not unlike how his daughter used to laugh when she was at play.

But the sound he'd just heard was not a memory—it was real. Unless he was finally losing his mind.

"Did you hear that, Angul?" The bladed jerked in its sheath, angry at being confined and not in hand.

The monk increased his sidestepping pace through the chilly constriction. Then he was through. The corridor ahead diverged. One path was the one Raidon had charted, it led up to Xxiphu's crown. The other passage he hadn't bothered to investigate in the chamber of seeing.

It was down this passage a half familiar voice out of time asked, "Papa? Do you want to play?"

His core temperature plunged as goose bumps swept across his skin. Raidon's mouth fell open. The light of the Cerulean Sign on his chest dimmed.

"A-Ailyn?"

A hint of movement flashed in the lesser tunnel. He spied the silhouette of a girl with unbound hair. "Catch me if you can!"

"Who are you?" Raidon shouted down the tunnel. The girl's voice was like his daughter's, but not quite a match.

Fading laughter was his answer.

The monk sprinted into the corridor. It wasn't the tunnel that led to the Eldest. He knew following this diversion was a bad idea. Yet he couldn't stop. Despite being someone who fancied himself ruled by reason first and emotion second, sometimes emotion's need was equal to reason's. Or, he realized as the tunnel walls flashed past, sometimes brute emotion burst reason's bonds.

"Stop!" he called.

“Only if you catch me!” came the voice—even fainter, as if the distance between them had increased. Raidon doubled his already swift pace by deciding to throw all caution to the wind. If a pit or larger cavity opened in the corridor ahead, he wouldn’t be able to stop in time to save himself from a fall.

Angul twitched in the sheath again, as if trying to catch the monk’s attention. But he was determined not to be distracted from finding out what farce was being played out on his account. He hoped it was not a farce... His heart beat more swiftly than his exertion alone could account for.

He raced around a short curve in the tunnel and collided with a wall. He saved himself some pain by rolling into it and absorbing his excess momentum across his whole body.

But Raidon had come to a dead end, and it was empty.

The goose bumps returned. He shouted, “Who are you? Didn’t you want to play?”

“I’m right here, Papa.” The voice came from behind him.

Raidon whirled, his heart in his throat.

There stood, plain as day, a small human child, about five years old, with dark hair. In one hand she held a tiny, mahogany-handled mithral bell. She gave it a little ring.

“I love the gift you brought me,” the girl said.

“I...” Raidon’s mind refused to resolve what he was seeing. The girl looked like his lost daughter, at least in rough strokes. Long black hair, pale eyes, and upturned nose. But it wasn’t her. Was it? No, of course it couldn’t be.

Ailyn was dead.

“Many things are possible in Xxiphu,” the girl said.

Raidon released a short breath like the swift exhalation he made striking a foe. He said, “You can read my mind?”

The girl who reminded him so much of Ailyn cocked her head. “Don’t be silly. You’re silly!”

Raidon took a step forward. “Who are you really? You’re not my daughter. She died a long time ago.”

The girl's face fell. She nodded dejectedly. "Yes. I died. All alone without you to save me."

Anger warmed his face then. "You're not Ailyn! You hardly even resemble my daughter! What are you?"

The five-year-old looked up and caught Raidon with her blue-eyed gaze, still watery with unshed tears. She said, "I know you're not my papa." The bell in the girl's hand melted, becoming a rag doll instead, with silver buttons for eyes. "But I have lost my Papa. Can you help me find him?"

Raidon blinked, wondering just where reality ended and his own neurosis began. He wondered if his mind was being assaulted by some abolethic trick.

The monk relaxed his shoulders and shook his head. "I'm sorry, child. I don't even think you're real." He began to move past the girl. "I have something very important I must attend to."

"You don't think I'm real?" the girl screamed, her voice taking on the hearty volume of a child's tantrum. "I am here! I am alive!" The faux Ailyn reached forward and punched her chubby fist into Raidon's calf. Her hand moved right through his body as if she were a ghost.

Pain exploded in his leg. He fell as the muscles in his limb gave out all at once.

Luckily the girl didn't press her advantage. It took Raidon a heartbeat to shut the pain out. He rolled away and stood in a single, smooth motion. Back on his feet, the monk swept Angul free of its sheath. The pain was smoothed away by the sword's instant attention. Simultaneously, a portion of his anxiety dimmed, leaving him feeling clearheaded and calm.

The image of the girl remained. Not merely a trick of the mind then, if Angul could sense it too.

"You are real, in some sense," Raidon allowed, keeping the blade between himself and the small form. "But I am not your father, nor do I know where to find him. But—if

you let me pass without touching me as you just did, I can come back for you. How does that sound?"

The child's face grew hopeful. "Promise? I don't like it here at all. It's scary."

"Yes. That it is. Now, step aside so we don't accidentally collide, all right? When I finish what I must do, I'll find you here. Is it a deal?"

The temperature of the Cerulean Sign dropped. As it did, the girl's features shuddered. She gasped as if in pain.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He took a half step closer.

Angul said, She is a memory loosed by the Eldest's unconscious to delay you. It will not agree to your bargains.

Sweep it away.

"She's only a little girl," Raidon countered, his voice pleading. She is a remnant of a little girl, a hollow shell filled with aberration that must be purged, said Angul.

"No!"

The child in question raised her head. She lifted her arms in a manner Ailyn used to in order to beg a hug. "My name is Opal. Take me with you?"

The temperature of his spellscar dropped further. He retreated a pace.

"When I've done what I need to, your mind will be your own. Can you just stay here until then? It may be hard.

Perhaps the hardest thing you've ever had to do. But if you stay put and do not follow me, I can save you."

The girl's whole frame vibrated and she yelped. She blinked out of view for an instant, but then returned, her form translucent and hazy.

Opal said, "It hurts. But I can try. If you hurry!"

Raidon bolted from the room, leaving the little girl behind. Tears broke out on his cheeks. He wanted to sweep her up and hold her close against all the dangers of Xxiphu.

But the best thing he could do for her was slay the Eldest, so that her mind would at least remain her own, even if she

was only a lost dream. He hoped the creature's death would give her peace.

When he returned to the place where the corridors diverged, he found Opal waiting. She stood in the center of the corridor with her shoulders slouched and her head drooping over her chest in a sorrowful pose. Her unbound hair fell across her features.

"Opal, I told you to stay—"

The girl loosed a raw hunting scream that no human throat could ever hope to achieve. Raidon's breath began to steam as the Cerulean Sign violently reacted to the sound reverberating in the corridor.

The child slowly lifted her gaze. It was much changed from the frightened, tearful face Raidon had pleaded with moments earlier. Jagged lines of care etched it, as if the girl had aged decades in an eyeblink. Her mouth was unhinged and opened on a black void that reminded Raidon of what he'd seen on Xxiphu's crown in the schematic.

The Eldest filled her like a hand inside a puppet.

Kill her, Angul said.

"No. I will not. I... cannot."

Opal produced her hunting scream once more and advanced on him.

Raidon raised Angul. The sword blazed with cerulean fire and attempted to sweep up and out in an arc that would have decapitated the child's image. The half-elf restrained the willful blade.

"Leave her alone," he said, talking not only to his wayward sword but also to the foulness that controlled Opal.

"I will find you regardless of whether I disrupt this lone memory. Leave her, and I will not be forced to slay you when I find you!"

You cannot bargain with the unconscious mind of the Eldest aboleth. You can only slay it and any puppets it creates.

Raidon moved to his left, keeping Angul between him and the possessed memory. He said, "If I can avoid destroying her, I shall!"

She need not kill you, only distract you long enough for the ritual to be completed.

Raidon realized the Blade Cerulean, for all its headstrong ways, spoke the truth.

A deep sound, like underground waters rushing below his feet, snatched Raidon's attention back down the corridor where he'd originally entered.

The sound came from the two facing ice slabs lining the tunnel. The ice was cracking, breaking, and crumbling.

It was a cave-in, except that as each piece struck the floor it shattered into motes of glowing steam. The mist immediately swirled past the girl and Raidon up the passage he intended to travel. In the void left behind, dozens of figures stood blinking in confusion. Confusion that lasted only heartbeats.

The newly released memories rotated as if of one mind until each regarded the monk with smoldering eyes.

They all simultaneously loosed screams, each as horrid as Opal's. In concert, the sound nearly froze Raidon to the spot and stopped his heart.

Angul's flame dipped, then resurged twice as bright. Its warmth seared Raidon's flesh, chasing out the incipient chill in a painful instant.

Opal, the closest of the advancing horde, leaped for the monk's throat.

He sobbed as he cut the five-year-old down with a single stroke. Her scream caused the other images to pause.

Opal's gruesome face fell slack and resumed her earlier innocent visage. She sighed, catching Raidon's eyes.

"Why?" she whispered. Then her image broke into so many chasing sparks.

Raidon watched the sparks fade out like campfire embers. He saw the other images, memories, and captured dreams

resume their headlong charge. He was aware of his face turning red and his mouth distorting into the raving scream of a berserker. He took note of but did not feel tears stream from his eyes and reflect Angul's avenging flame. He fell upon the possessed figures like a blood-crazed predator.

Raidon saw all of this from a distance, for he no longer seemed to inhabit his own body.

Why? Because when he struck down the girl, who might as well have been Ailyn herself, Raidon went mad.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Gallery of Seeing

Japheth walked up a sloped corridor crusted with steaming memories.

His hands were steady and his vision unstained by dust. New abilities and insights swarmed in his blood, eager to manifest as spells should he call them. He was almost elated, but couldn't quite allow himself that pleasure.

Whenever he recalled the ultimate origin of his new spells, a chill shivered down his spine.

One of those spells even allowed him to see Anusha in her golden armor, as well as Anusha's yellow-hued companion who walked ahead, without recourse to the tin of dust hidden in his cloak. Already his new pact was proving useful—above and beyond the usefulness of saving his life, of course.

The warlock realized his hope was on the rise. He knew full well there could be, in fact likely would be, repercussions following the drastic choice he'd made. It was even possible he could fall into the same sort of servitude that marked the first pact he'd sworn to the Lord of Bats. Well, probably even worse than what he'd endured under the terms of his first pact, before he escaped its strictures. The alien stars cared less about mortal kind than even bloodthirsty Neifion.

But no one had promised him his decision would be easy. He might hold on to his independence and sanity, or he might not. He wasn't naive, nor was his ego so inflated that he was going to promise himself a happy ending despite the reassurance he'd given to Anusha. No, he knew the risks. He accepted them in return for the chance to act a little longer on the stage, hopefully long enough to slip Anusha

free of her dream form. And if fate was kind, perhaps even a little while longer.

In the short term, he merely had to be careful none of his new spells squirmed out of his control.

Anusha, who walked beside him, allowed her hand to fall into his. It felt warm and real. He was happy for the moment of contact. He knew she could only accomplish that much by paying careful attention.

"I am thankful, you know," she said.

"For what?"

"That you came looking for me. That I'm not alone in this awful place. Even if we fail, I want you to know..."

He knew pulling her into a hug risked breaking the illusion of her solidity. He just tightened his grip on her dreamwrought hand. He said, "I couldn't bear the thought of you down here by yourself. I had to come. There was no choice."

Anusha smiled at that and looked him in the eye. "Once you wake me, holding your hand won't take so much concentration."

"Yes."

"Which means I'll be able to thank you properly."

Japheth's heart jumped. Had he understood her meaning? He decided to interpret her words as his body wanted.

He said, "I look forward to that."

They grinned at each other like fools.

Walking in the lead, Yeva raised a hand. She whispered, "Something odd ahead!"

Japheth released Anusha's hand. They joined Yeva, who stood looking apprehensively around a bend in the corridor.

"What?" Anusha whispered.

"Another chamber ahead, filled with some sort of growth I haven't seen before. I heard voices too. Speaking Common."

Japheth sidled up and leaned to gaze around the corner. The corridor spilled into a wider space that seemed, at least from his limited vantage, overgrown with creepers thick

with murky liquid flowing in spastic pulses. Overlarge pears or oranges the color of blood dangled from the growth.

But his attention was riveted by the sound of conversation. He heard his own name!

"Someone's talking about me!" he whispered. The voice was familiar.

Flush in the confidence of his renewed power, Japheth proceeded around the bend despite Yeva's whispered protest.

He advanced into a large space that held a circular pool and a dozen or more exits around the periphery.

And as he'd half expected, Captain Thoster and the wizard Seren stood near the pool as if waiting for him. Near one exit, a woman slumped, obviously exhausted. She looked vaguely familiar—Japheth placed her as a crew member on Thoster's ship. The only one missing was the crazy monk.

Recalling their last meeting, he raised one arm, fingers arranged just so, ready to cast.

Thoster raised a hand too, but apparently in a friendly greeting. "Hoy, Japheth! We have to stop running into each other like this."

The warlock studied the man, who looked far the worse for wear. He seemed to be suffering from some sort of body-wide skin condition. Seren, on the other hand, looked as dour as ever, though at least she'd changed into clothing more suited to exploring a dangerous, city-sized relic.

"Indeed, Captain," Japheth finally said. "You seem to have the advantage of me. You have been waiting here to talk to me?"

"In a manner of speaking, my friend," the captain said. "We're here on account of Raidon Kane, the last Keeper of the Cerulean Sign. He's gone on to take care of things above. But when we noticed you traipsing up from below, he asked Seren and me to have a chat with you."

Japheth eyed the captain. The man obviously had more in mind than a mere chat. The warlock glanced back.

Anusha and Yeva moved to join him in the chamber, but kept quiet as ghosts.

Thoster and the wizard gave no sign they noticed the two dream images, though the woman by the exit drew her sword.

The warlock addressed Seren. "So, what do you want to talk about? I don't have much time. The Eldest is waking."

The wizard said, "Right. Your imbecilic experiments have caused Xxiphu to wake from centuries of sleep."

"Nogah's theft of the stone triggered the Abolethic Sovereignty's awakening, not me," he replied, feeling warm blood in his cheeks.

"Sure, the priestess started the ball rolling, but the damage could still have been contained," Seren said.

"Problem is, you took off with the Dreamheart! Since then, you've continued to tinker with the relic, haven't you? It's directly connected to Xxiphu, idiot. The more you tried to save your little friend, the more the servitors of the Eldest stirred. If you'd given up the stone, Xxiphu might have fallen back into somnolence. Now it's too late."

The woman's speech stirred him to anger. He said in a cold voice, "I don't have to explain myself to you. Now stand aside. I have an appointment with the Eldest."

"I'm afraid not," said Thoster. "At least, not without handing over the stone." The pirate pulled his clicking blade from its sheath. Metallic disks inset flush in the blade whirred with golemlike precision. Poison pulsed within hair-thin conduits running from hilt to tip, whetting the blade's edge with an emerald sheen.

Japheth eyed the captain's weapon, then looked to Seren. "You are against me too?"

The wizard drew her wand and said, "You may be a natural charmer, my dark-haired friend, but you're not bringing the Dreamheart upstairs. If you do, the aboleths

will take it from you, and all we've suffered to reach this nightmarish place will be for nothing."

"Don't be too sure," the warlock said. "I've reached something of an accommodation with the creatures of this city." Which was technically true, though Japheth lied by omission. He had an accommodation with the denizens of Xxiphu only insofar as he shared something of the same power they called upon. That didn't make him and the Sovereignty allies any more than it made allies of opposing armies who brandished swords forged by the same dwarf clan.

In any event, his admission didn't allay Seren's concern, it enflamed it. She exclaimed, "You've become a pawn of the Dreamheart!"

"No. Listen, none of us have time for this kind of squabble. Aboleths are waking and hatching below, and the Lord of Bats is loose somewhere in Xxiphu too, looking for me so he can have his vengeance. I've wasted too much time already. Stand aside."

Seren sighed, then hurled a magical orb of force toward his head. He turned sideways at the last moment. The orb struck his shoulder. It burst in a flurry of slashing shards.

His blood made tiny ribbons in the air, but the cut was superficial. A few of the force shards scattered behind him. One caught Yeva in the stomach. The strange woman doubled over in pain. He saw Anusha draw her dream blade even as her helm shimmered into place over her head.

Time to try out something more aggressive from his new pact. Even as Thoster charged around the limb of the pool, Japheth called on one of his new star-born powers.

He finished the spell just before the captain made it into sword range. Inky black, frigid tendrils seemed to burst from the freebooter's body. The captain cried out in surprise and pain. The tendrils curled and wound back around their host instantly, so tightly that the captain's headlong dash ended in a sliding sprawl.

That should hold the captain for a bit, Japheth thought. Long enough to deal with a lone wizard.

Anusha rushed past him with her blade high. Seren incanted another spell, continuing to give no indication she was aware of the threat the invisible dreams in the room posed. He hoped Anusha didn't hurt Seren badly—but that hope did not prompt him to deflect Anusha's charge.

Anusha swatted the wizard with the flat of her blade. On contact, Seren cried in astonishment. Her spell evaporated in a flash of harmless green fire.

"Remember me, war wizard?" Anusha asked the confused Seren. "I saved your life down in Gethshemeth's watery lair. Don't make me end you now. One more spell, and I run you through with my blade!" Anusha's voice wavered, but was resolute.

The wizard swallowed. She said, "If Japheth the Stubborn would give up the Dreamheart, our quarrel would be done. If you care for the black-caped idiot, tell him to hand it over. For the world's sake!"

This last seemed to deflate Anusha's enthusiasm to batter Seren into unconsciousness or worse. She looked back and asked Japheth, "Is she right?"

The warlock frowned in exasperation. Based on his previous conversations with Seren, he doubted she cared much for Toril's fate. Time was too short for such distractions. "No, we must keep the stone. I need to use the Dreamheart to extract your soul from the Eldest's mind. It was the conduit that sucked you in, and it will serve the same function to pull you out. You and Yeva both."

As if waiting for her cue, Yeva said, "Then the world can look after itself!" She touched two fingers to her temple. A bolt of hazy force seemed to arc from her brow and burrow into the wizard's.

Seren threw her head back in shock. She dropped her wand and toppled backward, narrowly missing the pool.

She lay still, save for her ragged breath and darting eyes. She seemed to be watching images Japheth couldn't see. Mental phantasms?

Thoster yelled, "Godsdamn it, where did that come from?"

The crew woman hadn't moved throughout the entire conflict. When Japheth turned and frowned at her, the woman's resolve broke. She said, "Sorry, Captain, I'm heading back to the ship!" The woman spun and dashed down the tunnel.

The freebooter chose that moment to hurl himself on his stomach three feet closer to Japheth. He still had one hand on his blade, and he managed to shove its tip into Japheth's boot.

"Blast it, Thoster!" yelled Japheth as he leaped back. A sting along the side of his foot told the tale. The blade tip had pierced his skin, which meant some of the venom had likely entered his blood.

The captain struggled to free himself from his shadowy binding. In his fury, Japheth considered blasting the man with a curse. One curse in particular, swimming in his consciousness, desired to burst free... But no. He should save that one for a foe not already lying bound on the floor.

"Leave the stone," said Thoster. "In return, I'll give you the anti-venom. Otherwise you'll succumb to the poison."

"I wonder," said Japheth. His cloak should shield him from the poison's effects, he believed—it had protected him against the bites of venomous bats and serpents in the past.

But his foot tingled. He'd seen creatures struck down by Thoster's sword blacken in seconds under assault from its poison kiss. A slight numbness followed the tingles. He waited another few heartbeats. Nothing worse immediately occurred.

Japheth announced, "It seems I'll survive your blow, Captain. Which means I bid you good-bye, until next time you ambush me." He moved around the chamber, giving the captain and the wizard extra clearance.

"Release me from these visions, Japheth!" called Seren, her gaze darting.

"I don't think so."

Anusha said, "We're just going to leave them here?"

"For now. The bonds will release the captain eventually."

Yeva offered, "And the wizard will regain the use of her limbs and eyes soon enough."

The muscles below Thoster's mottled scaled skin jumped and strained. He said, "Don't be a fool! You really think you can succeed? That thing's got you hoodwinked—admit it!"

Curiosity forced Japheth to pause. He said, "I suppose you might be right. But I know my own motivations— nothing is controlling me."

"Ridiculous!" said the wizard, her eyes finally finding the warlock. "By Szass Tam's throne, how would you know if the godsdamned relic was warping your mind? When you're captivated by an enchantment, you don't realize it. Even you know that much spell theory, I'm sure."

"Hmm." Japheth considered. He looked at Anusha. He couldn't tell what she was thinking with her helm on, though he knew she had to be desperate to move on.

"Well, answer me this, then," he said. "What did you do with Anusha's body when you chased me from my suite in Veltalar?"

"We brought her aboard Green Siren" said Thoster. "She sleeps there now, guarded by Blackie. She is safe and cared for."

"I thank you for that. And Green Siren is where?"

"Docked at the outer edge of Xxiphu, outfitted for earth sailing, at least for a time. That way. Seren whipped up some fierce magic." The captain nodded toward the exit where the crew woman had loitered.

Earth sailing? He didn't know exactly what that was, but he could guess. He gave an appreciative nod. The wizard was resourceful. If he was going to get out of there afterward, he needed to mend bridges, not burn them.

Japheth made a snap decision. "Yeva? Can you release Seren?"

"What?" said the woman.

"Hear me out," said Japheth. "If Seren wants, she can accompany us. So can Thoster. They can make certain I don't accidentally relinquish the Dreamheart to the Eldest. We could use their strength... and they can make good on their promise to the monk."

"I'm not sure I want to enter into the Eldest's presence," said Seren.

"It's still sleeping, and its servitors are busy waking it. Help me."

"You... would really have me?"

"Of course. I intend to pry Anusha free from this place. But I don't want to 'doom the world,' as you implied I might, in the process. So, aid me instead of hindering me. What do you say?"

The wizard's brow crinkled. "Very well."

Yeva loosed her immobilizing mind lock with a blink. Seren stood, picked up her wand, and straightened her garments.

The captain cleared his throat in an exaggerated fashion.

"Are you in, Captain?"

"Yes, though you're a fool. But let me loose, and I'll keep an eye on you like you said, in case your mind is less your own than you think. If so, cutting you down would be the least I could do."

"I... appreciate that," said Japheth. With a thought, he released his spell. The inky tendrils faded like smoke.

Thoster stood and nodded at the warlock. "Let's be going, then?"

The wizard said, "Before you walked in, Japheth, I used this scrying pool to locate a shortcut from the throne chamber above us to where Green Siren is tied up. Just in case we live and need to beat a hasty retreat."

Thoster laughed. "In case? Count on it. All of us are getting out of here."

Japheth wondered. Besides the aboleths and the Eldest, the Lord of Bats was near. On the other hand, if Seren's shortcut proved passable, they wouldn't have to double back and come face to face with a vengeance-seeking Neifion. Anusha said, "The tide rises again, Japheth. I don't have much time left."

Dread prickled Japheth's skin. Even though he'd renewed their alliance, the captain and Seren had stolen too much of his time.

"Which way?" he asked.

Anusha motioned toward one of the corridors. "This way" she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Throne Chamber

Raidon had nearly succumbed to psychosis once before. Right after he'd learned Ailyn had died alone, he'd tried to murder a mob of Shou. When he'd been prevented from that mad caprice, he'd resorted to starving himself.

The intercession of the artificial entity Cynosure saved many innocents that day, his own vaunted self-discipline had crumbled before his rage. It had also been Cynosure who argued the monk into taking an interest in the needs of the world again, rather than allowing himself to waste away by going without food. Raidon's acceptance of Cynosure's premise was ultimately responsible for the semblance of equanimity he'd worn since then.

But the mere appearance of composure was not a foundation on which sanity could long stand. Since the day he'd learned of his adopted daughter's death, he'd never regained the placid assurance a master of Xiang Temple should rightfully enjoy. He'd never forgiven himself for being absent when Ailyn needed him most. He had merely played the role of someone who seemed content through each gray day's dawning.

When Raidon cut down Opal, his facade shattered. It didn't even matter that she was a puppet of the Eldest. All the desolation and heartache Raidon had walled away following Ailyn's death resurged. In doing so, it buckled the walls of his selfhood. His mind was like a smashed mirror. Each shard of his broken mind reflected only a limited view of reality. Events playing out within each piece were haphazard and unrelated.

His mind was shattered. And Cynosure was not there to help put him back together again.

So the Blade Cerulean leaped into the gap.

The sword pumped Raidon with purpose and will. Instead of collapsing into a raving heap when Opal flashed away, the monk spun and leaped for the other advancing memories and caught dreams. He destroyed the possessed images by the dozen with cleansing fire.

The man holding the blade was lost at sea. As the Eldest had used Opal like a marionette, Angul now directed Raidon. Each sweep and cut Raidon made was under the sword's sole direction. While Angul was used to overmastering the egos of its wielders, the blade rarely enjoyed such freedom in its choice of actions and enemies to engage. The blade relished the feeling. Though it was not given to introspection, Angul determined not to waste the opportunity. What need did it have for the conscious mind of Raidon Kane?

When the corridor was cleared of every last foe, Raidon paused. Or rather Angul did. Angul relished the perfection of its new vessel, now the blade's to direct.

The monk's body turned and sprinted up the corridor after a wisp of churning mist, Angul raised high in one hand. Raidon's throat screamed, "The Eldest wakes to the end of its interminable existence!"

A sprint up a steep, winding slope finally saw Raidon into Xxiphu's throne chamber.

Dozens of entrances like the one Raidon had passed through were arrayed along the floor of the vast chamber.

Most vented white plumes.

Thousands of cavities honeycombed the high walls of the throne chamber, each large enough to hold an adult aboleth in a comfortable bed of slime. Though most gaped empty, several hundred squirmed with the recently awakened. Each occupied berth burned with a purple flame.

Self-scribing lines rayed across the floor, illustrating concepts that couldn't exist in reality. Flares of multihued light leaped from the crevices and canyons of the shifting

diagrams. The inconstant light played on the bellies of the things that hovered Overhead.

Aboleths circled above the writhing floor, flying in perfect formation. One creature followed the next through the air, creating a great ring that could have spanned a city bazaar. Each creature glowed with phosphorescent vigor.

Some of the aboleths were human sized, others were two or three times larger. Many sported hides of brown, rust, jade, and even white. However, several were black as ebony, and these were large as dragons.

Angul presumed these were elder aboleths, old beyond the reckoning of history and swollen with centuries of growth and fell power. They flew with their lesser kin in geometric formation, screaming out the repetitive stanzas of a magical working. The ritual they attempted sent shudders through the air with each revolution of their flying ring.

The mist pouring in from the ground-level entrances was sucked into a vortex shaped by the spinning ring of levitating aboleths. The vapor was constricted to a rivulet of white so dense it seemed a liquid, which spilled upward toward the chamber's apex, into the darkness high above.

The monk's eyes were blind behind a cascade of tears, but he did not stumble as he raced across the great floor of the chamber. He easily vaulted the undulating patterns. Angul's preternatural senses did not require Raidon's eyes to take in the wonders of the chamber.

To the Blade Cerulean, the throne room was like a treasury laid out for ransack. Forged in Stardeep to put down a priest of the Sovereignty, Angul came close to being awestruck despite the blade's single-minded nature. For here were the creatures who the priest had served! The gathered aboleths in the chamber made up the Sovereignty itself! Only one being seemed missing from the tableau...

Angul exploded in cerulean fire. A flaming blue sphere leaped from the razor-sharp tip. The blaze hurtled toward

the ceiling as if hurled from a catapult. It dazed the eyes of flying and perching aboleths alike.

The fire arced high and pierced the haze of shadow clinging to the ceiling. In the light of the flare, something appalling was revealed.

A gruesome shape was lodged in the ceiling. No, Angul saw. That assessment was incorrect.

The thing was the ceiling. The flare's light revealed a bloated thing the size of a temple complex, one whose bulk stretched at least as wide as what should have been the roof. The creature's stony hide was as desolate as the dead face of a moon and seemed nearly as large. However, what moon ever possessed dead eyes for craters?

Thousands of eyes speckled the gray expanse of petrified flesh, some small as coins while others were large as houses. Most were closed, but some stared blankly like the glassy orbs of corpses. These gazed into the empty space beneath the creature, down upon the circling aboleths, and across the prophecies scribed on the floor.

It was the Eldest. It presided over its progeny as a statue might, without breath.

Angul comprehended what was happening within the chamber: the last of the recalled thoughts and memories distributed throughout Xxiphu were splashing upward and being absorbed. Before, a single thought turned over once every ten thousand years in the thing's gargantuan brain. But now, hundreds of new sensations quickened beneath its hard carapace.

Angul hesitated. The blade did not know fear. But the panorama of the throne room complete with the Eldest was beyond the blade's experience. Even Angul's arrogant belief that it was up for any challenge Anally slammed against stark reality. The Blade Cerulean's light dimmed. Angul recognized its strength alone could not hope to win the hour.

It needed to join its power to the Sign's. To do that, Angul needed Raidon Kane after all.

Jagged shards scraped and punctured him. The world was a broken mirror, and he lay in its ruins. An image showed in each shard. Some revealed a man named Raidon Kane. Some were of a girl named Ailyn. A few showed the likeness of a different child named Opal.

If he didn't move, he felt hardly any pain at all. He'd learned that despite not really having a body, attempting to see the pieces as a whole was agonizing. When he tried to stand up to see more than a few splinters at once, pieces of him were flayed off by the crush of shards, each as sharp as a torturer's scalpel.

Better to just lie still and watch the events in the glass unfold. In some, Raidon laughed. In others he slept, ate, or walked. In several he fought. He didn't like to watch those. If he did so too long, he shifted his perspective so often in order to follow the action that he sliced himself anew on the images' sharp edges. Welcome, agony.

So he observed images other than his own, chiefly of the girl Ailyn. These were mostly idyllic. Mostly. A couple showed grave markers. When he turned his attention to avert his gaze from them, the shards cut more cruelly than ever.

Thus when the sky blue Are blasted into him, tumbling his perspective end over end through the shattered splinters of his mind, Raidon screamed like a lost soul. The fire roared, furnace hot, across the bed of broken glass. The shards wilted under the heat. They slumped into reddish goo that began to congeal. When the flame puffed out, the melted pieces had formed together in a lumpy, sharp-edged mass.

The mirror was reassembled, but crudely and with mismatched seams. Nothing reflected in its crazed surface would ever look the same again.

Raidon heard music that he guessed was played on instruments forged of rotting skin and hollowed bones.

Unwept tears filtered everything through a quilt of fractured glints. The monk wiped his eyes with the back of his free hand and saw the throne chamber of Xxiphu. He saw the spiraling elder aboleths—and that which stared down with its ocean of eyes high above. The noise was the creatures' chanting ritual.

"I don't care," Raidon said. "Let me go, Angul."

All aberrations must be purged. You know this. Pull yourself together and join with me.

"I'm empty. I'm done."

Raidon made to throw down the sword, but the Blade Cerulean overrode his intention. Instead, the weapon pointed up at the ceiling.

Angul said, That is what we must defeat. Afterward you can collapse in upon yourself and embrace your weakness until death finds you..

"I killed her!" the monk screamed. His voice rang out into the throne chamber. "I cut her down! It is something that can never be forgiven!"

You did nothing that requires forgiveness. You did what was necessary. You cleansed an abomination, Angul offered.

"No!" This last denial was offered at such a volume that a few aboleths flying in formation overhead twitched.

Raidon briefly wondered why they weren't reacting to his presence. The effort of even that small question exhausted him.

You must call upon the Cerulean Sign and join its power to mine.

"I must do nothing."

Several aboleths resting in wall berths pressed to the edges of their moist balconies. They fixed their eyes on the intruder. The flying creatures overhead maintained their litany, but many now fixed an extra eye or two on the raving half-elf below.

“Time grows short. Will you compound your error by giving up now, rendering all your past actions a pointless charade?”

“Yes. Because that is what they were. The last futile gasps of someone who should have perished in the Year of Blue Fire.” Raidon tried again to fling the sword away and throw himself into one of the moving furrows that slid along the floor. His heart wasn’t in it, though. The Blade Cerulean easily checked him.

Four aboleths along the closest wall surged from their observation cavities, producing tiny waves of disturbed slime.

None of them had apparently been graced with a connection to Xxiphu’s orrery, for they slid down the walls like slugs dropped down the side of a garden wall. When they reached the floor, they squirted forward on a layer of ooze.

The four creatures advanced on Raidon in a ragged line. Their tentacles gesticulated and lashed, as if doing so was the only way they could express their surprise at finding an invader in their midst. If surprise was even an emotion such creatures were capable of.

Raidon was only vaguely aware of the onrushing threat. So when an orb of pulsing goo flashed toward his head, his body betrayed his fractured intentions and slipped to the side.

A volley of similar attacks burst from the other three creatures. Already in motion, the monk whirled and rolled to avoid each attack. His somersaulting evasion melted into a charge, almost without Raidon’s awareness. His trained muscle memory, once engaged, took over.

One aboleth had gotten slightly out ahead of the others. When he reached the creature, it tried to heave itself backward, but Raidon transferred his momentum into a high leap. He came down upon the creature with a slashing

elbow that smeared two of the creature's eyes into so much jelly.

A hollow scream burst from its tri-slit mouth, and its lashing tentacles redoubled their frenzy. Raidon rolled off the creature's back to face its three siblings. Angul remained quiet and kept its power quiescent, as if it sensed that urging the monk to use its aberration- slaying edge could push the mentally unstable man back into his fit of apathy.

The half-elf's face hardened into an expression of feral determination. Whatever else came to pass, the aboleths before him would rue challenging him. Though if they could not feel surprise, sorrow was also probably beyond their grasp. Raidon didn't much care, so long as he stamped them into nonexistence.

Now that he was in motion, he found he preferred it to being still. Smashing his fist or shin into the flesh of a monster was far better than letting his mind dwell, over and over again, on all his many failures. There was sure to be time enough for self recrimination later.

Or, if he was lucky, he would fail here in the bowels of the world and be dead.

He would cherish the peace of death.

Three abolethic minds reached for Raidon's and tried to leash it. Before, the monk's discipline had easily warded off alien instructions. But his mind was a stitchwork of barely knitted parts. The aboleths' mental strength easily curled into his brain and squeezed.

Angul acted, as if the blade had been waiting for just such a contingency. With a blaze of cerulean fire, the webs of control burned away so quickly that the monk hardly realized he had been momentarily leashed. Certainly his charge into the left flank of the next closest monster didn't suffer any loss of ferocity.

The monk, holding Angul in his right hand, executed a flying jab with his left fist. The momentum of his fist and

body lent the blow the ferocity of a sledgehammer's strike. Even as the jab pounded home, he stepped out and to the creature's right with his left foot. He stepped back with his right foot, spinning into what would have been a back fist, save for the fact Angul was clutched in his right hand.

The creature, already dazed by the jab and off guard from the monk's swift position change, didn't even realize its danger until after it was gutted by Angul. The spray of dark blood doused man and sword, but the Blade Cerulean's next flare burned them both clean again.

One of the remaining two uninjured aboleths managed to slap Raidon with a tentacle. That time when the monk spun half around, it was because of the force of his enemy's attack. Stars briefly glinted around the edges of his vision. His breath sounded ragged in his lungs.

The other aboleth, sensing an advantage, conjured an orb of slime out of thin air, then sent it slashing at the Shou. Already dazed by the tentacle, Raidon couldn't quite avoid the orb, which punched him in the chest. The ooze splattered him, coating him in a thin layer of mucus that instantly began to harden.

Without realizing he reached for it, Raidon sought his focus.

A monk of Xiang Temple trained first in the ability to concentrate and find an inner point where all thought was concentrated. Only after monks showed some ability to find a focus were they trained in the martial arts.

Raidon visualized his body, and that immaterial part of himself that recognized itself as his working mind. He visualized his thoughts as lines of energy. Normally serene arcs, his thoughts were a thicket, more tangled and disordered than he could have imagined. He nearly gave up then, but habit took over. He imagined the lines smoothing, the knots loosening, and the wells of inner strength opening.

He focused on his diaphragm, then expelled the air in his lungs with an explosive “Kihop!”

The mucus coating him shattered, and the energy of his own body flowed up his spine and into his limbs. It was a feeling he’d failed to embrace for far too long.

His focus was back, at least partially. Some parts of his mind were in too much disarray for Raidon to fully regain what he’d trained so hard to master. But what focus he had was enough. It allowed him to access that which tattooed his chest.

The Cerulean Sign blazed anew with a color akin to that of Angul. In its light, the aboleths around him shrunk back. For them, life would soon be over.

However, the light served as a beacon. Every occupied cavity in the throne chamber’s walls suddenly disgorged its owner.

Well over a hundred aboleths slithered toward the floor and the lone Keeper that fought, if not for his life, then at least for the moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Xxiphu, Throne Chamber

Anusha led the pack. Japheth was right behind her, and Yeva and Seren brought up the rear. She should have been fearless in her fleshless invisibility. But she couldn't forget where the corridor she traveled led.

Even as they'd swarmed up the tunnel, another mighty psychic tug had nearly pulled her, and Yeva along with her, into the mind where the root of her spirit lodged. Japheth had saved her and Yeva yet again. However, he'd wiped his brow afterward, and a worried look flashed across his face. He'd almost failed to hold them. The next time the Eldest tugged, she would probably be gone.

Anusha tried not to think about it.

Then they emerged into Xxiphu's throne chamber. All her fears were shown as hollow caricatures.

A fierce conflict raged across the shifting floor. A swarm of aboleths thrashed and fought to collapse upon a figure who shone like a cerulean star. Sky blue light blazed from the man's sword, his chest, and even his eyes and fingertips. Everywhere the light struck, aboleths skirled in pain.

But he was one against an army. And even as he fought the creatures to a standstill, the larger elder aboleths whirling around in their ritual overhead continued their unearthly chant.

And the vast, many-eyed bulk that stared down from above seemed to gaze into her soul.

Anusha couldn't tear away from the Eldest's awful visage to gauge her companions' reactions, though she heard someone gasp and Japheth voice a hoarse curse.

Japheth said her name. She blinked and broke contact with the dead eyes overhead.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"What is the half-elf trying to accomplish?" asked Yeva.
"To kill the Eldest," said Seren.

The woman laughed. She said, "He'd better stop wasting his time with all the little ones, then, and start climbing."

Japheth said, "Anusha, you and Yeva—help Raidon. You too, Thoster and Seren!"

"I am not getting close to that thing!" said Yeva.

"Help him with the swarm," said the warlock, exasperation obvious in his manner.

"There are too many to fight," Seren said, one hand to her throat.

"Perhaps, but see?" Japheth gestured at the scene. "The monk draws their attention with his symbol. The cerulean light maddens them. So, drive into their rear and cull them while they remain focused on him. Between the four of you and Raidon, you actually have a chance. Few things can stop Anusha or even see her, and the same is likely true for Yeva. And I've witnessed how potent your spells are, Seren, and how deadly you are with your blade, Captain."

"And what will you be doing, warlock?" said Captain Thoster.

"I have a ritual of my own to perform. It will take some time, so I need to start immediately."

Japheth fixed Anusha with dark eyes. "I will see you free of this, I promise. But in the meantime..." He waved a hand toward the fight.

Anusha nodded, not trusting herself to reply.

Japheth flashed a smile, then stepped into his cloak. A moment later, he was gone. Anusha looked around, but didn't see him reappear. She wondered where the warlock had gone to perform his ritual. Hopefully to an out-of-the-way nook.

She turned to Yeva. "Should we take our revenge?" Yeva said, "Better to die fighting than hiding."

"Yes."

“Wait!” said Seren. The wizard traced symbols in the air with her wand. Where it passed, fading magical traces followed. Arcane syllables tumbled from her lips. Her eyes took on a dull citrine glow.

“All right, that worked!” said Seren, gesturing with her wand at Anusha and Yeva. “I can finally see both of you, which means I won’t accidentally catch one of you in a spell.”

“I still can’t,” said Thoster.

Seren ignored the captain.

Anusha concentrated on her armor, imagining it even more impenetrable. She raised her sword, and imagined it so sharp it could cut a zephyr in two.

Then she ran to join the fray.

She sprinted across the changing floor. Quick as she was, a ball of wizard fire bloomed ahead of her, setting alight four aboleths at a single stroke. Good for Seren! She’d half expected the wizard to turn tail. But there were so many aboleths! At least the flying ones above hadn’t yet engaged in the fight—not even the smallest, and thankfully not the largest. She was doubly glad, for among those chanting creatures, a few possessed a multitude of eyes like the aboleth able to see her in Xxiphu’s depths.

Anusha made contact with the enemy. Her blade swept through a creature with only the slightest tug. The aboleth died unaware anything had even threatened it. As it lay quivering and oozing dark fluid, she moved to the next. And the next. She whirled her sword around, maintaining its bitter sharpness with determined concentration.

Pain pinched her temple. She was exerting her dream form. If she pushed herself, she would falter and perhaps fall. But if she did not give Raidon—and by extension Japheth—a chance to succeed the Eldest would wake, and nothing would hold back her mind from its concentrated consciousness.

She renewed her onslaught, laying about with her dream blade like an avatar of death itself, even as her head began to pound with the ache of her unrelenting exertion.

Seren's breath was harsh in her own ears. She was terrified, and her hands, wand, and voice trembled with each spell she launched. Thankfully the creatures reacted to her magical lances as Japheth had predicted. The horde of aboleths were single-minded in their attempt to fall upon the blazing monk like a slime tsunami. None of her spells had so far piqued the interest of the attacking creatures, even those on the periphery.

Emboldened, she moved closer, until the rotting fish smell of the frantic aboleths became overwhelming.

Where had the warlock gone? Seren wondered if, despite all his brave words, the man hadn't just used the cloak to transport himself away from the entire enterprise. She believed that was unlikely, despite what she might consider in his place.

A bellow of triumph sounded in her left ear, and she flinched.

It was Thoster, slashing the posterior of an aboleth too busy trying to scramble over its siblings to guard its flank. The wound was deep, but the aboleth died from the poison before its organs could even react to the fluid spraying from it. More so than before, she was glad she'd decided to aid the captain instead of kill him when he'd revealed his strange condition to her.

Seren decided to expend a spell whose potency neared the height of her strength. She uttered the linchpin syllables and drew her wand around in the air just once. A fist-sized globe of white light hurtled into the mass of scrambling aboleths. Just before falling into their ranks, the globe detonated in a prismatic burst, spearing several at once.

The creatures squealed as their flanks were scorched. Better yet, they reeled around in confusion as the dazzling radiance blinded them.

A grim smile briefly touched Seren's lips.

She recited another incantation.

Before Japheth stepped from his cloak, he called again upon the utter darkness between the stars, whose hollow nothingness ate the light of neighboring constellations. He shrouded himself in that same obscuring darkness, then stepped forward into the very center of the throne chamber, where the floor was stable. The petrified gaze of the Eldest was a palpable force overhead so potent it vibrated the air, creating deep tones like massive cemetery bells. The warlock was careful not to look straight up.

Japheth took a quick survey to see if any creature was aware of his sudden appearance.

The main fight still raged.

The monk continued to harvest aboleths with his blade and Sign. Anusha, Yeva, Thoster, and Seren whittled away at the mass's flanks. The oldest aboleths continued their chant of waking. Japheth hoped he could begin and finish his ritual before they concluded theirs.

From his cloak he removed a rod, a battered scroll, and a vial of powdered dragon scales. These were the same implements he'd earlier used in an attempt to free Anusha's mind from captivity, minus a tome that hadn't proved useful. And minus the ring wound with Anusha's hair. In the frenzy of their arrival and the breaking of his pact stone, he'd failed to retrieve it from the angel of exploration.

Japheth hoped that Anusha's dream form itself would prove a better guide than loose strands of her hair ever could. He'd failed the last time he'd tried to free her, but only because the Dreamheart was not where her soul was rooted, as he'd mistakenly assumed.

No, her consciousness was snared by the Eldest itself. If she should falter and wake even briefly, her mind would be pulled into the beast and be consumed in an instant, becoming part of it. His heart beat in his throat when he imagined it.

A spectacular flare of light snapped his gaze back to the fight. Through the press of squirming aboleths, sky blue light blazed. Raidon had triggered some sort of exceptionally bright pulse from his chest.

Ignore it, he told himself.

Japheth pulled out the last two things he needed—the Dreamheart and the silver compact filled with his personal bane.

He set the relic down, facing the half-lidded eye upward. The voices of the chanting aboleths circling overhead broke for the briefest of moments before resuming. Luckily, none swooped down to pierce the darkness and relieve him of their progenitor's prodigal eye. The creatures had felt the relic's sudden proximity, even if they couldn't yet see it. In some ways, the small orb at his feet was more vital than the entire bulk of the Eldest stretched overhead.

He took hold of the silver compact. Its touch dried his mouth with anticipation. Trying not to think about its contents, he popped it open and administered a dose of traveler's dust to one eye. It occurred to him this would be the first test of his new pact. How well would it protect him from the symptoms of his addiction when tested?

He blinked at the irritation. Too late now.

Before the red haze completely overtook his perception, he unstoppered the vial of crushed dragon scales and poured them over the stone orb. Its harsh odor burned his nostrils.

Even as the oceanic surge of the dust washed over Japheth, he unrolled the scroll, twin to the one he'd used last time, and laid it out on the cold floor. It tried to curl back into a cylinder, so he used the Dreamheart to weigh

down the top and the toes of his boots the bottom. Its tip was broken off, but it was still serviceable. He picked up the jade rod blessed in a temple of Kelemvor. He bent forward, so he could both read the text and touch the end of the rod to the Dreamheart's mottled side.

The eye in the relic blinked. The sphere rotated until it aimed its gaze at him.

He shuddered, but spoke the words of the ritual, doing his best to ignore the distracting, blissful detachment the dust leaked into his blood. He judged the dust's ability to pierce veils was necessary, just in case his new spell that granted him the ability to see things unseen failed. He just had to make certain he wasn't borne away in the initial rush it produced.

Blasts, shouts, and explosions resounded through the chamber. He thought he heard a yell of victory, followed by a woman's shriek of pain. Not Anusha's, though, Japheth didn't stop chanting his ritual. He couldn't afford losing even another moment. There was no time to help his friends. Better not to even look.

His only silver lining was that the passivity the traveler's dust lent made it easier for him to ignore everything but the words on the curled page at his feet.

Raidon attempted to trace a great ring on the floor, one underlying the circle of aboleths flying above him. The Sign showed him the designs he must carve, one sigil at a time, with blasts of cerulean fire supplied by Angul.

The ring was an integral ingredient required to wreck the aboleth's waking ritual so violently that the Eldest would not only fail to rouse, but be snuffed out while it was at its most vulnerable.

In order to complete his counterritual circle, Raidon killed aboleths. All of which were simultaneously trying to kill him.

Every few moments, five or six tried to seize Raidon's mind with formless psychic clamps. Angul and the Sign

shattered each domination attempt without the monk being aware of them.

It required a larger fraction of his attention to dodge the constant barrage of slime, lightning, and whoknew what else. He spun beyond the periphery of an exploding sphere of green energy, flipped over a bolt of another as he skewered an aboleth, and ducked a tentacle slap. All was wild motion as he whittled away at the press of nonstop attacks.

When a lucky tentacle or body slam hit him, or a ravening bolt of energy, he staggered and sometimes even fell down. But Angul's balm instantly turned flaring pain into so much fading warmth, and his own trained reflexes righted him after each fall. Those lucky hits required only a minuscule portion of his awareness, but he had to reset his position each time he was pushed or knocked over. It was important he not lose his place on the floor.

Were he facing nearly any other enemy in such a multitude, Raidon would have long since been pulled under.

Neither Angul nor the Sign promised unending vitality. However, these creatures were the nemesis of the Keepers and their implements. Both sword and seal sapped some portion of their permanent strength to feed the monk what he required to keep standing amid the storm of death that struggled to pull him under. But the energy Angul and the Sign used to heal him was dwarfed by the power he channeled in a brief burst toward the floor every time he stepped forward.

Raidon wondered if all three of them—sword, seal, and himself—would be drained to their final end as they finished. If providence were kind, it would be so.

A muscled, boneless arm smashed Raidon in the face, bursting some sort of cyst encrusting its end. The smelly, fatty material that sprayed across Raidon burned like acid. Even before he could grit his teeth to endure the pain, Angul purged the damaged tissue and grew new skin cross

his face, neck, and left shoulder. Raidon bit his lip against the agony of the healing wave.

The Blade Cerulean's repair was nearly as painful as the attack that caused the damage.

My reserves falter, the blade warned.

Raidon grunted and moved another step.

He swept the sword through an advancing aboleth, then pointed Angul down to scribe another quick sigil in cerulean fire on the floor.

He weaved beneath a blast of green energy, whirled, and leaned forward to thrust Angul up through the mouth of an encroaching aboleth. This put his left leg in position to snap a devastating back kick at another foe. He advanced another step into the momentary clearing he'd created, and dashed off the next symbol with Angul.

If not for the press of lashing aboleths, Raidon's curving path across the floor would have been far more apparent. He realized he'd completed more than half the circuit mirroring the route of the chanting aboleths swimming through the air overhead, counter-current to their direction. Ironical, the monk reflected, that the mass of squalid bodies trying to smother him obscured what he was doing.

A tentacle grabbed his leg and pulled him facedown onto the stone. He felt bones in his face break. The Blade Cerulean roughly set the bones an instant later. But not completely.

Angul's healing surges were no longer completely erasing his wounds. The pain of each wound was eased, true, but blood ran down one of his arms, and now from his nose as well. Each alone wasn't enough to slow him, but the incomplete recoveries were adding up. It would be a close thing, whether he could finish his circle of binding before the swarm finished him.

It didn't matter. He would finish the circle, or he would fail.

If he failed, the Eldest would fully wake.

If he succeeded, then the aboleth's ritual would fail instead. One or the other. The fate of Faerun depended on what happened. Not that he cared. Even as he fought forward another step to draw the next sigil in the sequence, he wondered at his persistence. Faerun hadn't been particularly kind to Raidon over the last dozen years. Or, now that he thought about it, for most of his life. Yet there he was, striving for all he was worth, to save the world.

Perhaps some shred of honor yet motivated him, finding one last opportunity to shine amid the fused jumble of his personality.

Or perhaps it was merely Angul.

Raidon noticed that the number of attacks he had defended against over the last span of heartbeats had dropped off. He spared a moment to glance up from his last scribed glyph.

He was astounded to see that, indeed, only about a dozen aboleths—at least of the original number that had sleeted down the walls of the throne chamber—remained to contest him. And half of those were receiving attacks on their flanks, even as they tried to squirm toward Raidon. Some unseen force was alternately carving into and dazzling these outlier aboleths, even as wizard fire rained down upon the creatures from afar.

It was Seren! And... Captain Thoster too. The wizard unleashed a volley of fire into one of the aboleths advancing upon Raidon. By the spread of smoking, twitching, and nearly cleaved in twain aboleth bodies that spread out from the wizard and pirate, they had obviously been at it for some time. The two had achieved quite a tally, nearly equal to his own. It was almost as if they'd received help—

An acidic slime wave buffeted him, drawing his face into a rictus. Angul burned off the excess goo even as Raidon leaped into the air. As he reached the zenith of his jump, he pulled his elbow up next to his face, then slashed down with

it in tandem with his own descending weight, channeling all the force of his body into an aboleth's brow. The creature stopped moving. It was dazed, stunned, or dead, it didn't matter. He scribed another glyph.

But curiosity made him scan the room again before he pressed ahead. Japheth was nowhere to be seen. Good.

Seren and Thoster must have stopped the warlock and his tainted cargo after all.

In another few moments, his binding circle would be complete. A Seal of Slaying would lance the Eldest, strong enough to end its stony vigil forever.

Japheth uttered the final words of the ceremony. A jolt of energy transfixed him. Purple sparks burst from the Dreamheart, traveled along the rod, and grounded themselves in his drugged brain.

His vantage literally flashed upward, as he was bodily snatched into the air. Like a rag doll yanked by an angry toddler, he was borne to the chamber's zenith. The sudden acceleration followed by the jerking stop nearly snapped his neck.

He'd avoided meeting the Eldest's many-eyed gaze before. Now his ritual and the immediacy of the ancient aboleth compelled him to do so.

His proximity and drug-addled perspective showed the Eldest's skin to be something other than stone. It was a luminous expanse of chaos that churned and seethed. Indescribable forms entwined within that inconstant flesh, surging, billowing, and changing their shape. It was as if the skin was an interface between the world and something terrible. So close, awful sounds scraped at Japheth's ears too. Keening, bleating, and altogether atrocious.

But the eyes were what dazed Japheth and nearly struck him dead before he could conclude his purpose.

Though most were shuttered, the few that caught him in their alien regard burned him with a cosmic malignancy

that brought gorge to his throat. The star pact, that terrible oath he'd sworn in Xxiphu's spawning halls, was the only thing that saved his mind from being instantly blasted. The pact had inoculated him. Though he might later gouge out his eyes in a fit of lunacy, for the moment he retained the barest ability to think.

Japheth averted his vision. He wanted to stop up his ears too, but he had to extend one hand and lay it upon the Eldest.

"Relinquish she whose dream is here with us," said Japheth, his voice brittle but strong, "she who is called Anusha Marhana. Relinquish Anusha Marhana, and her companion named Yeva." Japheth wished he still had the strand of hair he'd used before.

"By the power of the natural world, I beseech you. By the power of arcane formulas, I ask you. By the power of your own flesh, the Dreamheart, through which you have allowed your influence into the world, I command you!"

An indefinable period of time passed. Japheth kept his palm pressed against the roiling, repellent flesh. His hand sizzled.

Something tickled the back of his mind. At first he thought it was a passing fancy, perhaps due to remnants of the traveler's dust not burnt out of his system by the ritual. Then he realized the feeling came from outside.

It was the Eldest. Or actually, a tiny fraction of the Eldest's still slumbering attention.

The knowledge of what he must do to secure Anusha's final release bloomed across the warlock's brain.

He sighed. So it was to be one final bargain?

Yes. Of course.

The warlock's life was one great tapestry of oaths, pacts, and deals, each balancing him on the knife-edge between achieving his ends and utter ruin.

Despite what it would mean for the world, Japheth nodded his head in agreement. He accepted the

arrangement.

At least the Eldest didn't require he swear another pact! That last thought gave him an idea. Even in the face of a creature whose wrath could well equal a god's fury, Japheth designed one last deceit.

Anusha thrust her dream sword into the heart of the last aboleth threatening the monk—or at least where she hoped its heart was located. She hit something vital, it leaned over and died.

She stepped away and raised her blade in triumph, though it wavered under the onslaught of her headache.

Raidon glanced in her general direction. The half-elf's face didn't betray his thoughts, though Anusha assumed the monk wondered how the creature had suddenly perished. She would have smiled, but with the pain pounding through her, it was all she could do to retain her form.

She'd felt the onset of similar distress once before when she had overextended herself. It seemed the pain had come quicker this time, and more intensely. Was it because she also maintained Yeva's form too, dreaming the woman real?

The monk didn't waste any more time looking for invisible allies. With his burning sword, he continued to cut glyphs into the floor, one after the other, and faster now that aboleths didn't contest his every step. Without the swarming aboleths to obscure the floor, the shape he scribed in bkte fire was clearly visible to every creature in the chamber. Raidon swiftly approached the end of this task.

The tone of the chanting creatures overhead warbled and broke, then resumed in a more frantic tone. The aboleths seemed torn between finishing their ritual and abandoning it in order to descend upon the monk.

Then the decision was no longer theirs. Raidon completed the circuit.

The circle of glyphs took fire. A shock wave of force blew the monk away from his own creation. The shock wave expanded in all directions and caught the soaring aboleths underneath. The force tumbled the creatures, great and small, in uncontrolled arcs through the air. Their chant, already on the hysterical edge of failure, collapsed.

The inscribed circle flamed so brightly, Anusha looked away.

A sound came from above. A booming, creaking noise like mountains make when they settle into their foundations. She glanced up.

The few eyes open on the great petrified belly began to squint and close, as if the fire of Raidon's circle was too bright for them. The Eldest was not rousing. It was falling back into slumber, perhaps even the sleep of true death!

Raidon Kane had killed the Eldest! Could it really be?

Harsh exclamations of fury echoed through the chamber. The aboleths buffeted from their ritual by the monk's counterworking cried out as one. They lashed their tentacles and writhed in a paroxysm of rage. Their beady eyes found Raidon, Seren, and Thoster, and a few even fixed on Anusha and Yeva.

"Back to the ship!" screamed Seren. "This way!" She turned toward a different passage than the one by which they had entered the throne chamber.

Anusha saw Raidon glance up. She followed his gaze to the screeching, gargantuan aboleths. The creatures were regaining control of their single-minded fury. Malicious red light burst from one of the massive, dark-hued elders. Another gesticulated with its tentacles in wide spirals, from which a green haze began to spread.

Yeva and Thoster darted after the retreating wizard. But Raidon wasn't moving. He just stood and stared at the great creatures flitting overhead. They no longer flew in their ritual formation, but instead prepared a revenge stroke on

the tiny half-elf below, apparently unconcerned with the cerulean fire he wielded.

Anusha looked for Japheth. Still nowhere to be seen.

"Let's go, Raidon!" she yelled at the monk. He glanced in her general direction and shook his head. Was he crying?

"Is that... Anusha?" said Raidon, his voice raised above the clamor of the remaining aboleths. "So the captain was right. Well, it doesn't matter. I fulfilled my oath. I tried to kill the Eldest. For some reason, I failed. I put it back to sleep, but I did not kill it as I intended."

She gasped. "Will it wake again?"

"No. At least not fully, and not soon. But it is not dead. I shall stay here and kill as many of the elder aboleths as I can before they consume me." He shrugged. The half-elf had lost his bearings. She hastened to him, letting go her dream blade as she did so. Her headache instantly eased.

Anusha grabbed one of Raidon's wrists, making certain her hand was solid enough to do so. "Come. We need you, Raidon. You've bound it, it was bound for millennia before. Perhaps you've given us another few thousand years. If so, I call that success!"

She gave a light tug. The monk sighed. "A half measure."

"Come with me!" she yelled, and pulled.

"Very well." His voice was not that of a man who'd just potentially saved Toril an age of grief. What was wrong with him?

"This way," said Anusha, pulling the monk along toward the tunnel exit Seren had departed through.

After a few steps, it was all she could do, even using her dream-twisting advantage, to keep up with him. The man could run when he decided to.

As they left the chamber, Anusha glanced back one last time, searching for the telltale black cloak. Still nothing.

But...

A shiver tickled at the nape of her neck. The feeling plunged down her spine into the small of her back. She

stumbled, losing her grip on Raidon's arm. "Go on!" she said, and spun around to see what had grazed her.

The elder aboleths pursued them. But... none were close enough to have grazed her. She summoned her dream blade anyhow.

It was as if a thousand tiny ants with warm feet ran up and down her body. "What's happening? Was this the end? Was she—"

Darkness engulfed her. The screams of the livid aboleths, the smell of rotting fish, the agony in her temples—all of it went away.

Anusha blinked.

Wan light from the porthole revealed a small room.

The woman gasped and sat up in her open travel chest. With eyes that felt wide as saucers, she soaked in the beautiful, wonderful, cramped cabin on Green Siren.

Tears slid down her cheek. She hugged herself, feeling her own warm, if noticeably skinny, self. A dog whined, then barked. A wagging tail thumped repeatedly against wooden planking. Lucky!

Japheth had done it. She was free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Leaving Xxiphu

Japheth witnessed Raidon Kane complete the binding. He perceived the great shock of negation expanding up from the freshly scribed hundred foot-diameter seal and penetrating the Eldest. The beast groaned, even in its petrified slumber, as if crying out against the injustice of the world.

But the tendril of awareness that dealt with Japheth insisted the warlock stick to his deal.

Japheth agreed and continued to hold the personality fragment to its end of the bargain, even as the elder servitors of Xxiphu swirling below Japheth's feet raged at their failure. He maintained his position and shouted, over and over again, even as his voice cracked, "Release Anusha Marhana! Release her!"

And just like that, Japheth felt Anusha's focus slip free. Yeva's too! "Yes!"

Anusha's focus sped away, seeking its rightful mooring. Yeva's foundered. He'd expected that and offered the homeless spirit a temporary roost in the dark confines of his rod. Though he couldn't see it, he felt the spirit of the strange woman take up residence within it.

The ritual concluded. He plunged toward the floor.

He instinctively reached out to grasp for a support where none existed. Wasting time clawing at empty air almost proved his death. But a moment before his brains were dashed out upon the floor of the throne chamber, he plunged into the gaping discontinuity of his cloak.

And stepped out into a rounded tunnel dripping with phosphorescent slime.

A sprinting man avoided colliding with him with a spectacular leap that cleared Japheth's head by inches.

The man rolled into a landing, was back on his feet a moment later, and turned to regard the warlock. "Japheth," he said, "you should not have come here."

"Raidon Kane," said Japheth. "We can argue that later. Right now about twenty-odd aboleths, each the size of a dragon, are coming down this corridor. We must go!" The monk regarded the warlock a heartbeat longer, then said, "The woman, your friend, was with me a moment ago in her intangible shape. She seems—"

"I released her, Raidon! I did it!" He raised a fist and grinned. "Now come on! Show me the way to your ship!"

Seren told me you outfitted Green Siren to bring you here."

The monk's face, normally an expressionless mask, wavered between resignation and anger. The half-elf didn't look well. His wild expression suggested he was on the edge of a mental break.

A scream of abolethic fury and a flash of red light behind Japheth lit the monk's face. It was enough to engage Raidon once more.

"This way. You will have to keep up with me. Perhaps we can catch up to Seren and Thoster. They went ahead—I haven't been this way before."

Raidon sprinted off down the corridor.

Japheth followed. He immediately fell behind.

He hadn't traversed more than a hundred yards when he detected a change in the timbre of the pursuing aboleths. Perhaps it was the star pact that gave him insight into the sounds. Or maybe it was because he knew why a passel of despairing servitors of Xxiphu, bent on murderous revenge, would suddenly give up the chase.

He knew why they exulted instead. He'd given them a gift beyond measure.

Or at least they would initially assume he had.

Right now, they rejoiced that their progenitor wasn't dead. They rejoiced because they believed they had the key

to resuming their rousing chant where they'd left off.

Soon enough, the aboleths and the Eldest's slumbering, yet all-too-active subconscious would realize his deception. He hoped he could get out of the terrible city and back to Green Siren—where, the stars willing, Anusha waited—before then.

Despite his deception, the warlock had still provided the aboleths a prize that would prove all too useful. He regretted it, but not enough that he would have decided differently if given the chance to do it over.

Japheth ran.

Despite his earlier implication, Raidon did wait up for Japheth. Every so often the monk paused at the edge of a pool of slime where an aboleth yet slumbered. As the warlock caught up, the monk plunged Angul into the cavity, killing the monster before it even realized its peril. An expression of grim satisfaction hardened the monk's face each time.

When Raidon had his blade out, Japheth stayed clear. With the new pact, Japheth suspected the Blade Cerulean would see him as essentially no different from an aboleth or other aberrant creature. The weapon was insane.

And Japheth suspected, the more he watched the half-elf, so was the wielder.

The tunnel spit the gasping Japheth into a cavity whose far side was open to the massive vault that surrounded Xxiphu. Green Siren hung unsuspended in the air just feet from a protruding stone shelf. Seeing it hovering without support, save for a few slack ropes tied to the shelf, gave Japheth a momentary rush of vertigo.

Sparkling gold and red points of light swirled around the ship.

Raidon, Thoster, Seren, and several crew were also visible, including the first mate. Raidon was boarding. Seren stood on the deck of Green Siren nearest the shelf. Thoster's strong voice was directing the crew to cast off.

Japheth ran to the gangplank and crossed.

Raidon gave the warlock a hard look as he pounded across the plank. Japheth was glad to see the monk had sheathed Angul once more.

"Let's get out of here," Japheth said.

"Cast off." yelled Thoster.

The crew severed the last lines holding the ship. Green Siren drifted away from the shelf, toward the open air of the hollow.

"Raidon," said Seren, "will you control the ascent?" She gestured to a ritual circle smeared onto the main deck.

The monk continued to stare at Japheth, but nodded. Then he said, "And you still have the Dreamheart safe, Japheth?"

"I had to give it up."

"What?" Seren gasped. Her face lost all color. Raidon snorted, as if he'd already guessed. Japheth tensed, ready to defend himself if the monk went for him. The tableau held for several heartbeats, until an exclamation by three crew members drew their attention back to the increasingly distant stone shelf.

Two humanoid figures and one shadowy hound stood on it.

Japheth sucked in air. Even at the large and growing distance, he recognized the figures as Malyanna and Neifion.

Malyanna lifted something over her head. A spherical object.

"What kind of boneheaded stunt did you pull out there, lad?" said Thoster. "Is that—?"

"It's the Dreamheart!" said Seren. "It doesn't matter," said Japheth. "Why not?" asked Thoster.

"Because I locked up a portion of the Dreamheart's strength. They can't use it to its full power." He didn't volunteer that he'd switched pacts and had locked up a portion of the stone's essence within himself. That was what

kept him safe from the crimson road. He fancied he detected the tendrils of influence he'd stolen locked in opposition with the demonic power of his addiction, striving one against the other but equally matched. As long as that struggle persisted, neither could muster the strength to claim the warlock. It was a delicate balance.

"Are you mad?" Seren asked. "The stone still has power, no matter how much you've drawn off."

"Perhaps your meddling is the reason the Eldest did not die as I intended," said Raidon.

"It's not dead?" said Thoster, his brow crinkled with concern.

"Not dead, but sleeping again," said Raidon. Seren said, "Oh, that's just wonderful!" She pointed an accusatory finger at Japheth and said, "Does the Dreamheart retain enough strength to break Raidon's binding over the Eldest?"

Raidon shifted his weight, preparatory to drawing Angul.

Japheth didn't know the answer to Seren's question. Maybe. But he pointed back to the shelf. "Perhaps it's escaped your notice, but Malyanna holds the Dreamheart. She must have taken it from the throne chamber. So the binding has not broken. She didn't let the Eldest or its servitors have it."

Through the air separating them, the eladrin noble's piercing gaze found Japheth. He knew, even without being able to clearly see her face, that Malyanna scowled at him.

"Why would she do that?"

"I... don't know." But he suspected. The audacious eladrin might have snatched the stone to use as a bargaining chip against the Eldest. The woman had a dark agenda, and perhaps rousing the Eldest was only part of her plan. Not that he could imagine anything worse.

The ship's drift saw them out of the cavity and into the vast subterranean cist.

Japheth watched the ledge, even though Xxiphu's coiling sides competed for his attention. The silhouette he'd identified as Neifion seemed agitated. Almost like he was growing in size..... then he unfurled enormous bat wings.

"We have to go. Now!" He pointed. Neifion's wings were apparent to all.

"Your crime will not go unpunished," Raidon promised. Then he stepped into the ritual circle.

The moment the monk entered the smeared radius, the ship's drifting prow straightened. The glowing points eriglobing the ship pulsed as one, revealing themselves to Japheth as tiny fish.

Neifion launched himself from the ledge. His black wings brought an answering rustle from Japheth's cloak.

The Lord of Bats sought every last vestige of his stolen strength.

The ship broke upward, straight toward the vault's ceiling.

Already close, Green Siren punctured the craggy rock, which folded open before them and closed behind.

Mast-first, Green Siren shot up through solid stone like an escaped festival balloon into empty air.

Anusha was free of the long nightmare. When she convinced herself she wasn't merely hallucinating, she considered plunging back into dream, intending to find and help, Japheth return to the ship.

But she was too hyped up to fall asleep, and the mere thought of looking for one of the vials of sleep turned her stomach. She decided that trying to return to her dream form just then was probably one of the stupider plans she'd ever contemplated, given her recent history and circumstances. Japheth had shown himself more than capable. Though it was nearly as hard as anything she'd ever done, she managed to put aside her worry about him for a little while.

She occupied her attention by wolfing down all the biscuits and hard rations she could scrounge from the travel chest, save for a few pieces she allowed Lucky to take from her hand. After that, she lit the lantern bolted to the wall to provide more light. She found the basin, a waterskin, and a clean towel she'd had when she shared the cabin with Japheth before the Dreamheart had pulled her... No. Don't think about that.

She sighed as she wiped away the residue of days from her skin and hair. Someone must have tended to her, even fed her, while she lay unconscious. Otherwise she'd have died in her sleep after so long without waking.

She brushed her hair, wondering what she was forgetting... Yeva!

What had become of the woman who'd accompanied her through Xxiphu's bowels? Had Japheth freed Yeva too? If so, unlike herself, Yeva had no body to return to.

Did that mean the woman was merely dead? "Yeva?"

No answer.

Anusha heard excited voices on the deck. She gazed out the porthole.

"Oh gods, we're floating." Indeed, the ship hovered over a gulf of darkness. She'd heard Seren say the ship had been modified to find Xxiphu, but she hadn't known what to expect. A constellation of tiny gleams surrounded the craft. Even as she finally grasped that the ship hovered within an enormous subterranean cavity, the floorboards creaked. Simultaneously, it seemed as if a heavy person stepped briefly onto her shoulders.

She saw the vault's ceiling rush down... no, the ship lurched upward toward it.

Anusha flinched from the expected impact. When she opened her eyes again, the vast cavern she'd spied through the porthole was gone. Now the glass showed layers of dark material that dropped away one after another. Sometimes the dark matrix was veined by tracteries of pale blue, green,

and crystal. The continuous but ever-changing consistency of the subsiding material was mesmerizing. It seemed Green Siren had indeed been outfitted to sail on more than seas. She realized she was watching a crosscut through hard bedrock. They were rising up through it!

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you," said a voice behind her.

Anusha turned.

Japheth stood in the doorway.

The room suddenly seemed warmer.

A tension she'd been holding in her back relaxed. He was alive! But the anxiety gave way to a wholly new tautness in her chest.

"Beautiful? I'm skinny as a starved child," she said.

"No. You take my breath away." Without light from the porthole, the only illumination in the room emerged from the lantern. Its waving light spilled shadows across the room, over Japheth's body, and across his face. His eyes reflected the dancing flame.

"What do you see through the glass?" he said, pointing to the porthole.

"I don't know! The rock, I guess, as we rise through the earth." Anusha motioned him over. "Come, look with me?"

Japheth entered the cabin and closed the door. In three steps he was across the narrow chamber until he stood just behind Anusha at the glass. He smelled her fragrance, vital again after slowly fading while she lay limp and senseless.

The sight of her nearly melted him.

"Are we finally safe?" she said, face pointed toward the glass so that he studied her profile. He couldn't imagine more shapely features.

"For now. The Eldest remains... partly bound. The worst will not come to pass."

She looked at him, waiting for further explanation.

"I took into myself a portion of the Dreamheart's energy. Energy the Eldest might have used to catalyze its full awakening. It didn't realize I'd done so."

"Why does it matter what it realized?"

"Because," he continued, "it may gain partial Awareness. I had to leave the Dreamheart in the Eldest's possession to assure your freedom."

Anusha furrowed her brow but continued to gaze through the glass. Finally she said, "I'm glad you left that terrible thing behind."

"Yes."

She sighed, then leaned back into him. His arms wrapped around her slender form without conscious direction.

Her scent overwhelmed him, and her warmth brought blood to his face. He rested his chin on her damp hair.

Tin glad you're no longer a formless dream," he said.

She laughed.

They watched the mottled earth flow past together, until Anusha tipped her face up and back. He dipped his head and shoulders to bring his lips to hers.

They kissed.

She tasted of joy, and life, and passion.

She turned into him, maintaining the kiss, and embraced him in turn. How long had he hungered to feel her arms around his body? It didn't matter.

The long months of attraction, building desire, and sundered heartache were washed away. Euphoria was a warmth that raced in his veins instead of blood. It seemed to him that her pulse matched his heart's cadence.

Japheth broke the embrace. When his breath was back, he said, "You have become the world to me."

Anusha, also breathing harder, brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. She met his gaze and held it with her dark eyes. In the dancing light, they seemed like the eyes of a tigress avid for the hunt.

A slow grin spanned her face. "Show me," she said.

They collapsed into each other, their lips meeting again, this time with a passion that could ignite a fire.

Their limbs entwined in that most human of all embraces. In his arms, Anusha was a star, a burning angel that cleaved to him.

He said her name in wonder, in worship. He silently vowed to never let her go again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Year of the Secret (1396 DR) Green Siren on the Sea of Fallen Stars

Green Siren burst from beneath the surface of the water like a leaping dolphin. The ship's prow fell back level with the horizon and the keel crashed down into the water, spawning frothy waves that raced away in all directions.

Raidon stepped clear of the ritual circle. The smeared perimeter was hardly even recognizable.

The shimmering penumbra surrounding the ship wavered, dulled, and finally collapsed. A rain of tiny, jewel-like fish dropped into the water, drained and dying after swimming so far and long away from their home.

Green Siren was a ship capable of sailing only water once more, and hardly the worse for wear despite her incredible journey.

He rubbed at his eyes until he saw sparks against blackness. Mortal exhaustion, physical and mental, tried to drag him to the planking. Out of habit, he resisted. Voices in his head screamed at him for all his sins. It disturbed Raidon that all the voices sounded like his own.

A distant rumble brought several hands to the starboard rail. Fingers pointed to the west, where a storm brewed.

Clouds boiled out of clear air over the horizon, piling one atop the next until a thunderhead towered over the sea. Exclamations rang out among the crew, who, by their chatter, had never witnessed a storm appear so suddenly: Neither had the monk. He frowned.

A wind out of the west slapped Green Siren, scattering the crew to trim the sails under the direction of the captain's harsh calls. It smelled first of salt, then rancid fish.

Raidon squinted into the wind and watched the storm build.

The water beneath the storm moved in a great circle. The Cerulean Sign on his chest cooled. The monk's frown became a scowl.

The swirling water dipped at its center. The concavity deepened until a vortex of whirling water lay across the waves, so wide that its mouth was visible even over the miles that separated it from Green Siren. The spinning walls danced with phosphorescent glimmers.

A long shape burst up from the vortex, shooting skyward in defiance of its catastrophic bulk. Gasps of dismay broke from every mouth.

Lightning sizzled down from the clouds and limned the massive obelisk in eye-searing white. The flash revealed the thing that crowned the obelisk. It was the Eldest. Unmoving and stiff as stone... but free of the rocky catacomb that had entombed it since it fell to Toril so many ages past.

Even before answering thunder boomed across Green Siren, the calamitous bulk of Xxiphu completed its skyward leap. It lodged in the thunderhead's belly.

Raidon touched the sign on his chest. The symbol wakened to blue fire.

He murmured, "As I failed Ailyn, and the child I cut down in the city, so I failed you."

Imprecations yammered in his ear as if from a hundred throats, though none of the nearby freebooters seemed to hear. The monk listened to all the voices, achieving a kind of focus by taking in the sound without concentrating on any individual voice, until their combined fury, fears, and maudlin inanities became as the sound of the surf, crashing and falling behind his thoughts.

The world would discover soon enough the depth of Raidon's failure. Then more than imaginary voices would decry the half-elf—at least until their calls for retribution against the one who failed to save them turned to cries of horror.

Xxiphu hovered above the Sea of Fallen Stars swaddled in the storm's heart.

This ends Book II of the Abolethic Sovereignty. The story concludes in Book III, Key of Stars.